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Nathaniel Wyllie

November. 1902









# **The Sheep-Stealers**



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# The Sheep-Stealers

By  
Violet Jacob



London  
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## Book I





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## CHAPTER I

### THE TWO COMMUNITIES

IN the earlier half of the nineteenth century, when most of the travelling done by our grandfathers was done by road, and the intercourse between districts by no means far apart was but small, a tract of country lying at the foot of the Black Mountain, which rises just inside the Welsh border, was as far behind the times of which I speak, as though it had been a hundred miles from any town.

Where the Great Western engines now roar down the Wye valley, carrying the traveller who makes his journey in spring through orchards full of pink blossom, the roads then lay in peaceful and unsophisticated quiet. Soon after leaving Hereford, the outline of the mountain might be seen raising itself like an awakening giant, over green hedges and rich meadowland from the midst of the verdure and cultivation.

Between its slopes and the somewhat oppressive luxuriance through which the river ran, a band of country totally unlike either of these in character, encircled the mountain's foot, and made a kind of intermediate stage between the desolate grandeur of the Twmpa (as the highest summit was called) and the parish of Crishowell with its farmyards and hayfields far beneath. The lanes leading up from Crishowell village were so steep that it was impossible for carts to ascend them, and the sheep-grazing population which inhabited the hill farms above, had to go up and down to the market-town of Llangarth, either on foot or on ponies brought in from the mountain runs. The "hill-people," as the slower-witted



dwellers in the valley called them, came seldom down except on market-days, when the observer mixing in these weekly gatherings in Llangarth market-place, might distinguish them as a leaner, harder race with a wider range of expression, due possibly to their larger outlook on the natural world. They were neither entirely mountain nor entirely valley bred, though retaining something of each locality, and something of the struggle between nature and civilization seemed to have entered into them, giving them that strenuousness which all transition must bring with it.

They lived, too, in the midst of what one might call a by-gone element, for the fields and uplands round their homes were full of the records of preceding generations. Strange graves scattered the hill-sides, ancient dates were cut in the walls of their houses, names identical with those on forgotten tombs might be found on outbuildings, and, in the hedges of the perpendicular lanes, stones stood here and there which tradition vaguely designated as "murder-stones," showing where the roadside tragedies of earlier-times had taken place. Local history told, too, of bloody battles fought round the spurs of the mountain in ancient British times, and, at one spot, a mound, visible to the eye of archæology, marked the place where three chieftains had been buried after one of those fights. Perhaps it was this which had given the name of "The Red Field" to a small farm at a short distance from the plateau. Imaginative people finding themselves in that region of neither yesterday nor to-day might have felt the crowding-in at every step of dead personalities, past customs and passions, in fact, a close treading on their heels of generations which had lain for years in their graves in Crishowell churchyard, or in the burying-places beside the little Methodist chapels.

An element of superstition which all this could not fail to bring with it, stalked abroad through those misty fields and lonely pastures, and, one can hardly wonder that at the time of which I am speaking, it was a powerful factor in the lives



of the illiterate shepherds and even of the better-educated farmers who owned sheep-runs on the mountain. Stories were extant of strange appearances seen by late riders on the bridle-tracks, and certain places were passed, even by daylight, with a great summoning-up of courage.

One of these shrines of horror was an innocent-looking spot called "The Boiling Wells," in the middle of a green track stretching over the Twmpa's shoulder, where a flat piece of slate rock jutted from the turf, and three small springs of water bubbled eternally up through the earth. Near this place two young farmers, returning at dusk from a sheep-run, had had an experience which they and all the hill-people were not quick to forget, for they had arrived breathless one evening at the Red Field Farm to detail to an open-mouthed audience of farm-labourers how they had been overtaken by a thunderstorm near the Boiling Wells, and how, as they neared the water, the horses had refused to pass it, wheeling round and flying from something visible only to themselves. Then the two men had become aware of a man's figure hovering in the dusk, and a luminous face had peered at one of them from between his horse's ears. At sight of this they had fled as fast as their terrified beasts could carry them, and, after galloping wildly in the increasing darkness for some time, they had been brought to a stand by finding themselves running against the fence which divided Red Field Farm from the mountain land.

In fact, the tales of fear which grew around this and other places in the neighbourhood were endless, though sceptics hinted that these strange things happened oftener on market-days than on any others, and that those who claimed to have seen more than their neighbours owed their pretensions more to having been what was called "market-peart" than to anything else. Still, the effect on the public mind was disquieting, and, in winter evenings, it kept many inside their doors or in the inspiring vicinity of the farm buildings.

To the dwellers in Crishowell village, who were disinclined



to question anything, all these tales, as they came down to their ears from the higher regions, were unmitigated horrors, to be accepted as best might be and retailed at corners over pipes with much repetition and comment, coloured here and there to suit the narrator's cast of mind. Living in their bit of valley where wages were small, needs few, and public-houses many, they had scant ideas beyond the round of weekly work, which terminated, in many cases, on Saturday night in a prolonged visit to some favoured inn, and a circuitous return to the domestic hearth afterwards.

Sunday, indeed, brought to these unsophisticated labourers its veneer of respectability. A bucket of water in the back garden, an inherited Sunday coat, a virtuous resolve not to smoke in any part of the churchyard in which the parson could see them, converted them from a quarter to eleven till half-past twelve, noon, into a chastened community which filed noisily into the battered pews of Crishowell church, there to remain till the final "Amen" let them loose upon the joys of a Sunday dinner in the family circle. After this, they might cast from them the garments of righteousness and sit about on gates with acquaintances to whom they apparently never spoke.

Though the hill-people descended into Crishowell, the Crishowell people rarely went up among their neighbours; only the Methodists among them journeyed upwards to attend the Chapels with which the higher land was dotted. In out-of-the-way corners by the thickly intersecting lanes these grim, square, unadorned little buildings were to be found. The wayfarer, coming unexpectedly upon one as he turned some sudden angle of his road, might pause to glance over the low wall which divided its unkempt precincts from the public path, at the few crooked tombstones rising amid a wilderness of coarse hemlock which spread even to the Chapel door, imparting a forlorn effect to the spot, and pervading the air with its rank smell. Many of these places were falling into disrepair from disuse, as, in summer weather, the meetings would often



be held on the hill-side, where the short turf would bear marks until the next heavy rain of iron-bound heels and heavy feet which had trodden in a ring round the spot. When the wind chanced to sit in the east, the sound of the hymns and psalms would come down with a kind of wail, by no means unimpressive, though somewhat prolonged and nasal, to the nearer parts of the valley, the favourite themes of death and judgment to come seeming singularly appropriate to the hard, fervent faces and the background of frowning mountain from which they sounded.

If it was a narrow religion which had obtained such a grasp upon these upland men and women, it was yet one from which they gained a great deal that few other things could have taught, and virtues adapted to their exposed life grew up among them, possibly in obedience to those laws of supply and demand which are part of Nature's self. Children reared in unyielding austerity, forced to sit meekly through hours of eloquence against which their hearts rebelled, while their bodies suffered in silence, groaned under their trials. But, when they had crossed the threshold of grown-up life, the fruits of these experiences would show in a dormant fund of endurance and tenacity, submerged, no doubt, by the tide of every-day impressions, but apt to re-appear in emergencies as a solid rock rises into view at low water.

Such were the two communities living close together on the borders of two nations, nominally one since the middle ages, but, in reality, only amalgamated down to a very few inches below the surface.



## CHAPTER II

RHYS<sup>1</sup>

It was the day after Christmas. The frost and snow, supposed to be suitable to the time, had held off from the West country and were waiting ready to pounce upon the world with a new year. The evenings had been damp and chilly of late, with not a breath of wind stirring to lift the fog which hung over the Black Mountain and pressed like a heavy, dead hand right into Crishowell village.

On the green track which led along the plateau at the foot of the Twmpa the air to-night lay still and thick. Noises made by the animal world were carried a long distance by the moist atmosphere, and sounds were audible to people who had learned to keep their ears open for which they might have listened in vain at ordinary times. The water, running through wet places, could be heard distinctly trickling among roots and coarse grasses and patches of rush, as well as the quick cropping of sheep and occasional scuttering of their feet over muddy bits of path ; and along the track from the direction of Llangarth came the dull thud of a horse's advancing hoofs and the constant sneezing of the animal as he tried in vain to blow the clinging damp from his nostrils. As they loomed out of the fog which gave to both horse and man an almost gigantic appearance, the rider, without waiting to pull up, slipped his leg over the pommel of the saddle and slid to his feet, the horse stopping of his own accord as he did so.

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced "Reece."



It was almost too thick to see more than a yard in front of one's face, and Rhys Walters stood a moment peering before him with narrowed eyes into what looked like a dead wall of motionless steam. Then he bent down to examine the spongy ground. It oozed and sucked at his boots when he moved about, and he frowned impatiently as he knelt to lay his ear against it. While he listened, a sound of distant running water made itself faintly heard through the windless evening, and his horse pricked his ears and turned his head towards it. The young man remounted and rode abruptly to the left, in the direction of the Boiling Wells.

As he went along with the rein lying loose on the bay horse's withers, the animal made a sudden plunge and swerved violently aside as a sheep appeared out of the mist and ran startled across the path under his very nose. But Rhys seemed hardly to notice the occurrence, except by a stronger pressure of his knees against the saddle, for he was thinking intently and the expression on his hard countenance showed that he was occupied with some affair much more difficult than horsemanship, which had been a simple matter to him from his very earliest youth.

He was a man to whom one physical exercise was as natural as another, his firmly-knit frame being equally adapted to everything ; and, though rather over middle-height than under it, he conveyed the impression of being very tall, more by his leanness and somewhat high shoulders than by actual inches. His hands and feet were well-shaped, though the latter fact was not apparent, on account of the stout leather leggings and clumsy boots which he wore, and every movement of his spare figure had the attraction of perfect balance and unconsciousness of effort.

His long face was one which few persons of any discernment would have passed without a second glance ; fewer still could have determined what it actually expressed. He had eyebrows of the real Welsh type coming down low towards the nose, the eyes underneath being set near together and looking



either brown or grey according to the light in which they were seen. They were usually called brown, to match the tanned complexion and dark hair to which they belonged. His cheekbones were high, his nose long and pointed, though the refinement which it might appear to indicate found its unexpected contradiction in a straight and unsensitive nostril.

When he spoke, Rhys used much less gesticulation than was common to his countrymen (for he was three-parts a Welshman), but his thin lips moved a great deal and the quick turns of his close-cropped head—he kept his hair short when it was the fashion among men to wear it rather long—showed that he did not by any means possess the true phlegmatic temperament. Above all, he looked entirely at one with the natural and animal creation around him. Had he been a poorer man, he might easily have been taken for a poacher, had he been a richer one, for a country gentleman of active and sporting tastes; as a matter of fact, he was neither of these, being a farmer and the son of a farmer. His earlier childhood had been spent in what one might almost call savagery, and the rest of his youth in Hereford Grammar School, where, except for a far more polished speech and accent than was natural to his position, he had learnt but a certain amount of what his parents wished him to acquire. He had also learned much of which they, in their greater simplicity, had never dreamed.

Of these two, Eli Walters and his wife, only Mrs. Walters was alive, and she lived with Rhys at Great Masterhouse, a farm standing high in Crishowell parish on the skirts of the mountain land. It was a long and ancient stone house which had consisted of one storey until Eli had added an upper floor to suit his more modern ideas of convenience, and, as this outcome of his full purse and soaring mind extended but half the length of the dwelling-house, it gave the approaching stranger a notion that it might be some kind of religious building with a squat tower at one end. Owing to the impossibility of dovetailing a proper staircase in, the upper rooms were reached from outside by a ladder with a weather-



beaten railing running up it. To this protection Eli, who occupied a room at the top, had often had reason to be grateful, for the excellent beer produced in Hereford town had played a larger part in his latter years than was altogether decorous ; many a time, on winter nights, Mrs. Walters, sitting below in the kitchen, had listened sternly to his uneven foot-step in its spasmodic descent to earth.

Great Masterhouse looked towards the Twmpa, and, from the kitchen window, the view presented to the eye a strip of turf forming a parade-ground for troops of cocks and hens. This sloped to a tortuous little stream, upon which the ducks, having picked up everything worth having near home, might cruise down to a pool in search of more alluring gluttonies. At the south side of the house lay the strip of garden that was all of which the farm could boast. It was used for vegetable-growing alone, and wore a dreary aspect all the year round, enlivened only for a short time in spring, when a pear-tree, trained up the dead wall of the additional storey, broke out into a green and white cloud. Old Walters, it is true, had taken some interest in the few yards of flower-bed it had contained in his lifetime. He had planted sweet-williams, peonies and such like, for he was a man who loved beauty in any form, though, unfortunately, he had been as apt to see it in the bottom of a beer-jug as in any other more desirable place.

His wife cared for none of these things, for she regarded the culture of what merely pleased the eye as a wanton throwing away of time. It seemed to her to be people's duty to make themselves as uncomfortable as possible in this world by way of suitable preparation for the next. So, after Eli had finished alike his drinks and his gardenings and been carried down the hill to Crishowell churchyard, the flowers disappeared from the poor little garden, and rows of sensible cabbages and onions raised their aggressive heads from the places they had left empty.

At the back was a great yard surrounded by outbuildings,



inconvenient. A worse education for a little boy could hardly be imagined, and Rhys' shrewdness was perhaps a source of greater danger to his character than any quality he possessed ; he was too acute to be deceived in Eli, and he knew perfectly the worth of an affection which, though genuine of its kind, would not hesitate to neglect him if it grew tired of him, or to sacrifice him if he stood in the way.

The one great good which he got out of his profitless childhood was an intense familiarity with outdoor life. The sky was his ceiling, the earth his carpet, and he wandered about the pastures around, the mountain above, and the valley below, with the same assurance that other little boys of his age felt in wandering about their nurseries. He knew the habits of every living creature and every nesting-place for miles ; he could climb like a mountain-sheep or run like a hare, and his observation of Nature became so highly developed as to make him, in some respects, very like an animal. He knew the meaning of every sound, distant or near, and the whole world teemed with voices for him which it generally keeps for birds and beasts alone.

It was only natural that he should be attracted by the delights of poaching, and an inveterate poacher he became ; he set nets for partridges and laid night-lines in the trout-streams of the valley, and no outdoor rascality entered his head which he did not immediately attempt. On the few occasions on which he was caught, Mrs. Walters, after rebuking him severely, took him to his father and insisted on his being thrashed, and when this happened, Rhys knew that there was no escape ; so he took his punishment with as much equanimity as he could, merely resolving to work his next escapade on more careful lines.

When he was five years old his brother died ; had he lived to be older he might have done something to humanize the selfish and uncivilized little boy, and his death, which was the blackest grief that Anne had ever known, seemed to turn the poor woman's already hard heart into stone. With her elder



child she lost the one real interest she had contrived to glean from her narrow life, and when the funeral was over and there was nothing left but an aching blank, she turned further from her husband and the boy, shutting herself round with a wall of indifference. Rhys was absolutely nothing to her. She was glad that he was so strong and healthy, and sorry that he was so disobedient ; beyond that she hardly gave him a thought. He was a sealed book to her—a sealed book with a binding which offended her and which it did not occur to her to open.

It was just at this time that an earnest preacher, a light in his sect and a man of extraordinary personal influence, came to hold meetings among the Methodists of the mountain district, and Anne went to hear him speak. With her grief, her silent bitterness, and her unsatisfied life, she was an ideal subject upon which this man's zeal could act. Before he had well begun what he called his "struggle for her soul," the work was half done and the issue decided ; the hard doctrines and straitened ideas which he preached appealed to her in a way that nothing else could ; the wholesale condemnation of sinners which he announced was entirely in accordance with a type of mind that had ever hated the Devil more than it had loved God, and she threw herself wholly into the sea of his relentless Christianity, for there were no half-measures with her.

Eli looked on at the spectacle with apprehension, quailing as he thought of her possible attempts at his own conversion to the paths of the more active and elaborate righteousness. But as time went on, and he found that his personal salvation formed no part of his wife's plans, he was a good deal relieved and felt very grateful to the preacher, welcoming anything which helped to keep them separate and divert her attention from his comfortable habits of life. He never interfered with her in any way, though he would sometimes stroll into the kitchen when a meeting was being held there, loitering about and pretending that he was not quite sober, while he internally enjoyed the agonies she suffered from fear that her decorous



guests should suspect what she perceived with horror. Thus did the malicious old farmer gratify his sense of humour.

So the years passed on until it occurred to the pair that Rhys' education should be considered. He must go to school, and they resolved to send him to the Grammar School at Hereford. The small amount of pride that Eli had was centred in the pleasant thought that he was, in his calling, a rich man. With all his laxity he had been shrewd in business, and could look round on his possessions with the knowledge that there was enough and to spare for his son and his son's son after him. The boy should better himself in life, should have the education which he had lacked, should spend his money with the best of the gentlefolks' children with whom he would be brought into contact at Hereford. The end of it was that Rhys, considerably interested in his new position, found himself one morning on the top of the Hereford coach with a Bible given him by Anne in one pocket and half-a-sovereign given him by Eli in the other. He was very much pleased with the half-sovereign.

His feelings as he rolled along were mixed. He could not but welcome the prospect of the livelier interests and companionships before him, but, at the same time, he knew very well that that freedom which had been the breath of his nostrils would be his no longer; and, until he saw how much he might be compensated for its loss in other ways, he could not exactly rejoice. As regards any sentiment at leaving his parents, he had not much.

He did not flatter himself that either would miss him to any distressing degree, and though he felt a little lump in his throat as he bade good-bye to his father, the sensation had passed almost as soon as he was out of sight. No, a new world was opening, and he prepared to plunge into it with a curiosity at once suspicious and hopeful.

Education in those days was neither so cheap nor so general as it has become now, and boys like himself, and even the children of much more well-to-do farmers than was Eli Walters,



had to content themselves with what schooling could be got in their native villages. Hereford Grammar School was chiefly attended by sons of professional men, and many of the neighbouring squires were satisfied to let their boys pick up all the learning they needed there. When Rhys, with his uncultivated country speech, made his appearance, many were inclined to despise him, holding aloof from him as from a being vastly inferior to themselves ; and, when they found out, as they soon did, that his father was a common farmer who worked with his hands, some became actively aggressive and began, after the manner of boys, to practise small cruelties upon the new-comer.

But they had caught the wrong man, and it was not long before their mistake was brought home to them. Rhys, with all his faults, was no shivering milksop fresh from his mother's apron-strings, but a hard and cautious young savage, with a heavier fist than most of his oppressors could boast of, and a cheerful willingness in using it freely.

So, though the bigger lads taught him the healthy lesson that there were higher powers than himself, his contemporaries soon decided that it was wiser to leave him alone. Besides, how was juvenile snobbishness to resist the attractions of one who could make such catapults and slings, knew things that only gipsies and poachers understood, and was familiar with phases of outdoor life which they had never so much as imagined? Though he made few friends during the six years he spent at school, he had many admirers, and as, little by little, his accent dropped from him and he adopted the manners of his associates, he began to be looked upon as something of a personage, and left school with a veneer of sophistication which hid from ordinary view the fact that he had no more changed in character than a man changes who accustoms himself to the perpetual wear of his Sunday clothes.

When he returned to Great Masterhouse and settled down to help his father on the farm, he was accepted by his kind as a much-travelled and very fine young man. On market-days in Llangarth, Eli was not a little proud of his tall son with his



green tail-coat and superior air, and he smiled complacently to see how the young fellows nudged each other as he went down the street, and what admiring glances were cast after him by the farmers' daughters. Among the latter he produced the same effect as an eligible duke might in a community of society young ladies. Poor old Eli, lying on his death-bed a few years later, told himself that it would not be his fault should Rhys be unsuccessful in life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rhys Walters rode along the plateau until he passed the Boiling Wells. There he turned again eastwards, going down an old grass-grown watercourse, the bed of which had become something like a path. The mist was not so thick, and a light showed through it a short way in front, like a little staring eye with long shining eyelashes piercing the damp. As he neared the house from which it proceeded, a door opened, letting a luminous stream into the fog, and a head peered out.

"Be that Mr. Walters?" said a voice.

"Here I am," replied Rhys, slipping from his horse.

The man came out and led the animal away to the back of the house, and Rhys entered, wiping the damp from his hair.



## CHAPTER III

### THE DIPPING-POOL

A GROUP of men, sitting round a blazing fire, some on heavy wooden chairs, some on a long settle, looked up as he entered. All were smoking. Those on the chairs gave them a deferential push back when they saw the new-comer.

"Very damp night outside," observed Rhys, nodding to the company.

"Indeed, so it be, sir. Come you in here near to the warmth, Master Walters," said a jolly-looking individual who sat closest to the chimney-corner, pointing invitingly to his next neighbour's chair. His next neighbour, an undersized man with a goat's beard, called Johnny Watkins, jumped up obediently.

"Thanks, thanks, don't disturb yourself," said Rhys politely, seating himself in the corner of the settle, "this will do very well for me."

The fire-place round which they were gathered was the broad kitchen range of the Dipping-Pool Inn, in which modest establishment bar and kitchen were one and the same place. Being situated in such an out-of-the-way spot, it was too little frequented by any but the few travellers over the mountain to make any addition profitable, Hosea Evans, the landlord, whose sign hung outside, entertaining his guests comfortably in the kitchen. He was assisted in his business by one Mary Vaughan, who stood in what would have been the character of barmaid in a larger hostelry, and brought to the company such drinks as were called for from the inner room in which she sat.



Within the memory of a few old people, the dried-up bed of the brook, which made a rough path to the house, had been a swift stream running into a pool before the door. This had been used for sheep-washing at one time, and Hosea, when he took the little inn, had not troubled himself to invent a new name for it ; so, though its appropriateness was not apparent, the "Dipping-Pool" it remained.

It was an unpretending, whitewashed house, squatting in the green creek as though ashamed to be seen within range of the public eye. Many people thought that it had reason to be so, as its present proprietor had borne an indifferent character for honesty in certain small ways, and had left Llangarth, where he had formerly lived, on account of the inconvenient attitude of local opinion. He was a thick-set, smiling man, of florid complexion, round whose broad face the red hair, beard, and whiskers formed such a perfect halo, that now, as he entered the kitchen and his head appeared over a wooden screen standing at the door, it produced something of the effect of a sunrise.

"Well, Mr. Walters," he began, when he had shut the door of the inner room carefully and sat down cumbrously beside Rhys, "and how be you minded to do?"

The company took its pipe out of its mouth and turned its gaze upon the young man. There was a pause. "There's a good deal against it," said Rhys, returning the stare, "but let's have a drop of something hot before we sit down to the matter. How about the kettle, Hosea, and a bottle of spirits?"

"Wal, I don't have no objection, not I," hazarded Charley Turnbull, the man by the chimney-corner, drawing a large hand across his mouth, and reflecting that Rhys would pay for it.

A call from Hosea brought in Mary Vaughan. She stood waiting while he gave the order with her eyes fixed upon Rhys, who was studiously contemplating his muddy boots ; he never so much as looked up to bid her good-evening.

"When you've brought the liquor, don't be settin' up, girl,"



said the landlord. "Go you up-stairs and leave we to our bysiness. I'll mind the hearth."

Mary's look wandered over the assembly, lighting for a moment upon Rhys Walters; her eyes were large and brilliant, and shone out of her serious face like flames; there seemed to be a slow fire behind them. She made no reply, but brought what was wanted, leaving the room with an indistinct good-night.

"If her did get to know, it would not do for we—indeed that it would not," remarked Johnny Watkins, shaking his head.

"Lawk! no; her would soon tell the old man," answered Turnbull. "Be the door fast behind her, Hosea?"

"Yes, sure."

"But put you the key well into the hole," continued Charley, "that there be no sound to go through."

"Be her a wag-tongued wench?" asked a man who had not yet spoken, and who, having come from a distance, was a stranger to some of those present.

"No, no," replied Hosea, "but her father do keep the toll-gate down below Pig Lane."

"Ah, well, to be sure."

The company again sat silent while the kettle was put on to boil and the fire stirred up; a shower of sparks flew out as Hosea punched and turned the logs with a plebeian-looking poker.

"Master Rhys—beg pardon, Mr. Walters, sir—no offence. Us have knowed ye since ye was no more nor a little lump of a boy," began Charley, who regarded himself as spokesman, with the every-day result that he was quietly accepted as such. "If you be to come along of us at the time we know of, us have thought, and indeed we all do say"—here he looked round upon the men for corroboration—"that Rebecca bein' a Bible person and a leading woman of power and glory in this job, we will be proud if you be she."

The orator stopped and replaced his pipe in his mouth as a kind of full-stop to the sentence.



Rhys Walters had never before considered himself in the light of a "Bible person," and he smiled slightly. "Is that your wish?" he inquired, scanning the faces in the firelight.

"Yes, surely," said Johnny Watkins, his squeaky voice audible above the murmur of assent. "Stevens and I were sayin'"—here he pointed to a man, who, finding himself brought under popular notice, wriggled in his chair with mingled anguish and enjoyment—"just before you come in, sir, what a beautiful female you would be."

Rhys, who had about as much resemblance to a woman as a pointer has to a lap-dog, laughed, and the others, at this, laughed too, while Johnny Watkins began to perceive in himself a wit of the highest order.

"It's very well I'm a clean-shaved man," said Walters, stroking his lean jaw. "It wouldn't have done for your style of looks, Hosea."

The company, being one to which a personality never failed to appeal, again roared with laughter, and Watkins saw with dismay that a greater than he had arisen; he made one mighty effort.

"Yes," he remarked, at the pitch of his penetrating voice, "yes. An a' might have set fire to the toll-gate with a's whiskers!"

Hosea turned upon him an awful glare, for his red hair had long been a weapon in the hands of his foes. He had no sprightliness of retort, but he was determined that Johnny's pleasantries should not continue for want of a solid, knock-down blow.

"If I had a beard like a billy-goat waggin' about under an ass's face," he said solemnly, "I'd keep it out o' the sight o' folks, for fear it might be made a mock of—that I would."

Johnny Watkins gave a gasp which made his beard wag more vehemently than ever, and retired abashed into silence.

Rhys had not come through the fog at that hour of the evening to listen to profitless disputes. The matter in hand, which was a projected attack upon a toll-gate not far from Llangarth,



interested him more now that he had become the prominent person in it, for he had arrived at the inn uncertain whether or no he would lend active support to the affair, it being more of a piece of out-of-the-way amusement to him than anything affecting his opinions.

At this time a wave of wrath which had a considerable foundation of justice was surging over South Wales. By a general Highway Act, a new principle of road-government had been brought in, under which the trustees of turnpike roads might raise money through tolls, sufficient to pay the interest of the debts and keep the highways in repair. For this reason the gates were withdrawn from the operation of the Highway Laws, the tolls increased in amount, and every means used by those in authority to uphold the revenues of their trusts. The gates had, in some cases, been taken by professional toll-renters, men who came from a distance, and who were consequently regarded with suspicion by the intensely conservative population of the rural districts. These people, having higher rents to make up, had refused to give credit to farmers, or to allow them to compound for tolls on easy terms as had been formerly their custom.

The effect of all this had been to rouse the public to a state of fury, which had resulted, in many places, in serious riots. In carrying out the provisions of their respective Acts, the trustees were under little or no control ; they erected fresh gates, interpreted the laws as they thought fit, and there was no appeal from their decisions. Added to these difficulties, a succession of wet harvests, and the fall in price of live stock had reduced the farmers' capital, and they and their dependents resented, as well they might, the new devices for raising money out of their emptying pockets.

The first riot had broken out at Carmarthen, and was the signal for a series of like disturbances all over the country. Although it had taken place in May, and now, as Rhys Walters and his companions sat by the Dipping-Pool fire, the year had almost reached its end, the reign of terror created was still



going on, though it had not, so far, begun in Breconshire. The Carmarthen rioters had banded themselves together about three hundred strong, under a person whom the law never succeeded in identifying, and who, assuming the name of "Rebecca," appeared dressed as a woman and mounted upon a black horse. "Rebecca and her children," as they were called by the terrified neighbourhood, marched upon one of the gates in the town armed with every conceivable kind of weapon, pitchforks, pistols, hay-knives—to say nothing of the crowbars and the mallets which they carried with them and with which they intended to destroy the bar. "Rebecca" had been chosen as a name for their captain in reference to an Old Testament text, which tells how Rebecca, bride of Isaac, on leaving her father's house, was blessed by Laban in these words: "Let thy seed possess the gate of those that hate them."

About two o'clock in the morning the strange tribe, some mounted and some on foot, had appeared near the toll and placed sentinels in the surrounding streets; and, before the astonished inhabitants, roused from their beds by the noise and the loud orders of Rebecca, could realize what was happening, the work of destruction was going bravely forward, the rioters using their implements like demons, not only upon the toll-bar, but upon all who tried to hinder them.

The toll-keeper came to his door remonstrating with the mob, but his appearance provoked a shower of stones, and he fled back into shelter pursued by shouts and jeers. His wife, a brave woman and a much better man than her husband, then came out and stood quietly in the middle of the road, and, in the lull of surprise which her action provoked, entreated the leader to spare the house, as her child lay dangerously ill within. One or two of the more ruffianly flung stones at the woman, but Rebecca turned upon them, dealing one of them a blow which sent him staggering, and announcing her intention of going to find out the truth.

Then, in the grey early light, the extraordinary figure, gigantic in its female dress, dismounted and stalked after the distracted



mother into the toll-house. When it emerged, the order was given to retreat, and the cavalcade dashed through the wrecked gate and disappeared in various directions into the country, just as the local police, according to time-honoured custom, were arriving half-an-hour too late. One or two dismounted stragglers were caught and punished, but the ringleader and most of the offenders escaped, though every effort was made to trace them; but it was whispered with bated breath that Rebecca rode abroad in distinguished company, and that many of the younger farmers, and even the gentry, were not above suspicion.

After this matters grew worse and worse. The success at Carmarthen encouraged the lawlessness that broke out on every side, and in some districts there was hardly a toll-bar remaining intact. Seeing this, the magistrates took decided action, the military were called out and special police enrolled, with the result that when the opposing forces met, each encounter was more serious and bloody than the last.

The panic spread on all sides. People told each other lying tales of cruelties practised by the devastating hordes, with details which made the hair of the respectable stand upright, while children who had read of Rebecca in their Bible lessons and now gathered from their elders that she was actually going about, fancied that Old Testament days had come back. They were prepared at any moment to meet any sort of Sunday character, from Joseph in his coat of many colours to Satan himself, horned, tailed, black, and pitch-forked, and without a stitch of clothes upon his unhallowed person.

"I think I shall have to come with you, neighbours," said Rhys, "and we had better be stirring and settle our doings. We should be ready for the first week of the year, for we don't want the moon rising on us too early. She ought to be up about eleven; that would do well enough. We'd be done and home by then."

"And how about horses?" inquired Hosea. "Them knowin'



old badgers in Llangarth will soon see who's movin'. An' ye can't dress up a beast as ye can a man."

"Trew enough," observed Charley Turnbull solemnly. He was beginning to wonder how he could get hold of a horse of some one else's.

"As to that, I shall ride a young mare I haven't had above a week. She's never been seen in the valley, and a lick of white paint down the faces of some o' your nags, and a white stocking here and there makes a wonderful difference. Those who have white-footed ones can use the blacking brush. And you must risk something," added Rhys, looking hard at Turnbull, and guessing his thoughts exactly.

"Woman's clothing be a fine protection," remarked Stevens; and Turnbull wished he had not been so reckless in giving away the part of Rebecca.

"Be you to ride all o' one side like the wenches do?" inquired the man who came from a distance, "or will ye put your leg across the saddle like a Christian?"

"Oh, I'll ride astride," said Rhys, "or I shan't be able to lay about me so well if need be."

"Petticoats an' all?"

"I suppose so."

Here a roar of laughter went up at the thought of his appearance, which Mary could hear plainly in the room overhead.

Had poor old Eli been in his son's place, the whimsicalities of his own costume would have given him hours of study and enjoyment. But it was not so with Rhys; humour was not predominant in him. He did not live sufficiently outside himself for that.

"I must look round for some sort of clothes," he said, rather stiffly. "It would be well for everybody to have something to hide their faces. I'll get Nannie Davis up at the farm to lend me an old sun-bonnet."

"An' I'll give ye a brown bit of a gown my sister Susan left here when her was over for Crishowell feast September last,"



volunteered Hosea. "It's been hangin' behind the door ever since."

"An' I'll find ye a cloak more fit for a skeercrow than for any other person," said a man called Jones. "Will ye have it?"

"Oh, yes, it'll do," replied Rhys.

"G'arge! an' you'll be a right hussy! Fit to skeer the old limb without any o' we."

Here there was another laugh.

"When ye spoke o' skeercrows," observed Johnny Watkins, who had been silent much longer than he liked, "it minds me o' a crewel turn one o' they figgers served my poor mother. Father could never abide the sight o' one since."

Rhys looked encouragingly at Johnny. He was nothing loth to change the subject. "What was that?" he asked.

"It were when old Hitchcock were parson down at Cris-howell. He and his lady had a great notion o' each other, an' when each fifth of August come round—bein' their marriage-day—any one as did go to the Vicarage with a 'good luck to ye, sir and madam,' or 'many happy returns o' the day,' got a bottle o' beer from Madam Hitchcock to take home an' drink their good health in. My mother, though she were a bit hard o' seein', did use to go, an' never missed a weddin'-day from the time her come to the parish to the day her was taken up on high. One year, as her went, her peered over the garden wall an' dropped a bob to the parson as he was in the midst o' the onion-bed standing quiet an' lookin' at the fruit. At the house, the missis were at the window an' her bobbed again. 'Wish you luck o' this day, ma'am,' says she. 'Thank you, Betty,' says madam, smilin' sweet. 'And good luck to the Reverend Hitchcock that's standin' among the onions outside. Never did I see the reverend parson look so well an' handsome,' says mother, smilin' an' laughin' more than was needful, her bein' a bit bashful. The lady give a look at her so as poor mother were fairly dazed, an' down come the window wi' a bang an' madam was gone. Mother waited there three-



quarters of an hour full, until a lad were sent out to tell her to go home an' no ale. One day as her an' father was passin', her said to father, says mother, 'Hitchcock be a wonderful man for flowers. Never a day do I go by but he's there squintin' at them.'

"'Lawk, you poor foondy<sup>1</sup> woman,' says father, 'do parson have straw round a's legs? 'Tis the skeercrow.' An' when he found how the dummy had cheated him out o' his beer, never could he look one i' the face again. 'Twas crewel, that it was."

<sup>1</sup> Foolish.



## CHAPTER IV

### AT THE YEW-STUMP AND AFTER

THE mist lifted a little as Rhys Walters left the Dipping-Pool and turned out of the watercourse on to smooth turf. He could not help smiling as he thought of Charley Turnbull's misgivings, though in his heart he sympathized with them more than he would admit, even to himself.

He looked forward with pleasure to the coming raid, and with still more to the prominent part he was to play in it, but through his pleasure ran the devout hope that he would not be recognized. Not that he feared the law more than he feared anything else, but his respectability was dear to him, as dear as his love of adventure, and the struggle to eat his cake and have it was a part of his inmost soul.

Only one person at Great Masterhouse was to know his secret, and that was Nannie Davis, an old servant who had belonged to the establishment since his birth, and who had screened and abetted many of his boyish pranks. She was built on an entirely opposite pattern to her mistress, and the unregenerate old woman had often felt a positive joy in his misdoings, the straitened atmosphere which clung round Mrs. Walters being at times like to suffocate her. From her Rhys intended hiding nothing. He knew that, whatever protest she might see fit to make, she would neither betray him nor grudge him the clothes necessary to his disguise. His plan was, briefly, to tell his mother that he had business in Abergavenny, a town some fourteen miles on the other side of the mountain, and, having ostentatiously departed for that place, to make



for the Dipping-Pool. To the Dipping-Pool also he would return when he had seen the adventure through, and from thence in a day or two home in peace. At least so he trusted.

The direct line from the inn to Great Masterhouse took him past one of the many remains of old buildings to be found round the mountain. Only a yard or so of broken wall indicated where a long-disused chapel had stood, and the roots of a yew marked the turf; where passing animals had scraped the bark with their hoofs, reddish patches proved what manner of tree the solitary stump had been. Some stones had been quarried from the ground close by, leaving a shallow pit almost overgrown with grass.

It was a dismal enough place, he thought, as he rode past, and his heart almost stopped as he heard his own name sounding from the quarry. Having found superstition inconvenient he had long ago rid himself of it, still the voice in the mist sent a perceptible chill through him.

"Rhys! Rhys!" came from the hollow, and a figure was distinguishable by the old wall.

He turned towards the spot, but the horse reared straight up; he had his own ideas about things which sprang out of mists. Rhys was never cruel to animals, seldom even rough, and he patted his neck, gripping him tightly with his knees and pressing him forward with those indescribable noises dear to horses' hearts.

The voice rang out again, this time with a very familiar tone.

"Mary! Is that you?" he called sharply, dismounting by the wall.

"Oh, Rhys!" she cried, as he came face to face with her, "don't you be angry! I've come all the way from the Dipping-Pool so as to see you here."

And as she caught sight of his expression, she burst into violent weeping.

He stood in front of her frowning, though the sight of her



distress touched him a little through his vexation. She had always touched him rather—that was the worst of it.

“What have you come here for?” he asked, feeling great misgivings as to the reason. “Come, sit here like a good girl and tell me. Lord! your dress is dripping. ’Tis like a madwoman to go running over the country these damp nights.”

And he drew her down upon the yew-stump and put his arm about her. The horse began to crop the short grass. He was completely reassured, and like many who considered themselves his betters, he found his stomach a source of much solace and occupation. Mary leaned her head against Rhys, and her sobs ceased as she found his arm round her; she was cold and wearied, and she was suffering an anxiety that was more than she could well bear.

“Rhys,” she said, “I know all about it. Mr. Evans was telling Turnbull o’ Tuesday evening, an’ I heard every word. Don’t you go—don’t you. I’ve come all the way through this lonesome place to ask you.” And she clung to him, imploring. He sat silent for a moment.

“Damnation,” he said at last between his teeth.

Mary’s tears broke out afresh. “Now you hate me for it, I know,” she sobbed, breaking away and standing before him, a slight wild figure against the clearing atmosphere. “But oh! how could I help it?”

“Nonsense,” said the young man impatiently, “come back and don’t be a fool. I couldn’t hate you, and that you know.”

“Is that true?” she asked, clasping her hands and fixing her large eyes on him. The wet mist had made her hair limp and heavy, and a lock of it showed on her shoulder, under the cloak she had thrown over her head. Even tears, cold, and wet could not make her anything but an attractive woman, and he put out his hand and took hers. It was like a piece of ice.

“You silly wench,” he said, pulling her towards him and kissing her. “Why do you come out like this, catching your



death of cold? Not but what I'm glad you came, all the same, for I don't seem to see you now-a-days, as I used to. What is it you want me to do?"

"Don't go to the toll-gate wi' them Rebecca people," she begged. "It's a black business, and oh! if you were to get caught what would they do to you? Rhys, there's a man in Carmarthen jail that I used to know, and I've heard tell that they won't let him out for years an' years. And what would become of me?"

"Mary," he said sharply, "have you told any one of this?"

"Never a soul have I spoken one word to, as God above made me," she answered. "'Twas likely I'd tell any one, and you in it; why should you think so bad of me, Rhys? I'd never mistrust you like that. An' for my own sake——"

He interrupted her with another kiss.

"Don't be angry, my dear, I don't distrust you at all. And I love you truly, Mary, indeed I do."

"Well then, if you do, you'll promise not to go along with Evans an' the rest, won't you?" she coaxed, putting her arms round his neck. "Promise, promise."

"I can't, Mary, I can't, so there's an end of it."

"Very well," she said in a trembling voice, "then good-bye, for I'd best be going."

She took up a corner of her cloak, and pressed it to her eyes; there was something infinitely pathetic in the gesture. It was an acceptance of so much—more even than lay in that one interview.

"Dear, don't you be afraid," said Rhys, "there's not the smallest chance of any of us being caught. We have it spread all over the country, that there's to be a fine to-do that night at the gate by the river, and every constable will be down there and out of our way."

"But the soldiers," said the girl; "they say they're hanging about everywhere. They'll be pouncing out upon you—mark my words—wi' their swords an' dreadful things, and, like as not, you'll be killed. Oh, Rhys! Rhys!"



"The soldiers will all be at the Wye gate with the police, you little blockhead, if there are any at all."

"Ah! you can't tell."

"Well, if they do come," exclaimed he, with a laugh, "they're not likely to catch me. If there's a run for it, I fancy I know this country better than any young fool that ever put on a yeomanry uniform and thought himself a soldier. Since you know so much, Mary, I may as well tell you the whole job. I'm to set out for Abergavenny two days beforehand, but I shan't go there, I shall go to the Dipping-Pool."

"I'm glad of that," she said simply, "for then I'll see you."

"And so," he went on without heeding her, "if the yeomanry should get wind of it and come down to the gate, I shall have a good mare under me, and I'll be into Abergavenny before the news of it gets even as far as Great Masterhouse. There's a man there who will swear to my having been in his house two days."

"But how do you know they'll keep their mouths shut—them at the Dipping-Pool, I mean? There's that Watkins, it's anything for talk wi' him."

He struck his fist on his knee.

"I'll break every bone in his sneaking body if he says a word now or after, and so I'll tell him. He's frightened out of his life of me as it is, and I'll scare him still more."

"Oh, Rhys, you're a wild man," she sighed, "and your look makes me cold when you talk like that. Listen now, you won't hurt my father? He's an old man, but he's not one o' those to stand by and see his gate destroyed without a word. I mind him well when he could use his hands wi' the best."

"I won't lay a finger on him, Mary."

The girl's heart smote her, when she remembered how her father's danger had weighed on her mind, as she sat waiting for Rhys to come by. Since seeing him, the old man had become but an afterthought; and yet, she had always been



reckoned a good daughter. But her world had turned on a different pivot for the last six months. She recognized that and sat silent.

"You needn't fear about him," continued her companion, observing the lines of repressed pain round her closed lips.

"I wasn't thinking of that; Rhys, you know what I'm thinking about. It's not the word for a maid to say to a man, but I must. When—when is it to be, Rhys?"

He plucked up a piece of grass and turned it over and over in his fingers before he answered. To say the truth, he had no desire to marry any one just now. That he loved the girl beside him he could not deny; that she loved him and had trusted his word completely was a fact of which he was profoundly aware. Of another fact he was profoundly aware too, and that was, that, if he were to make her rue it, he would be a blackguard. He did not want to be a blackguard, and he hated the thought of her being in trouble; she was good and true and loving, and she had, in spite of her position, a refined and delicate beauty he never saw among the girls who made eyes at him in Llangarth and giggled when he spoke to them. She would look lovely in the pretty clothes and the surroundings his money would buy for her. And, as he understood love, he loved her.

But what was she? An inn servant; there was no getting over that. His mother would be horrified were he to bring back a wife taken from such a place. For this, it is true, he cared but little, for the antagonism which had existed in his boyhood between himself and Mrs. Walters had stayed unchanged. They were on more equal terms, that was all. What he chose to do he would do. All the same his pride rebelled a little at the thought of marrying Mary, for he liked making a figure in the eyes of his neighbours.

For a few seconds neither of them spoke. The horse had ceased cropping and was pricking his ears; he whinnied softly, so softly that the sound was hardly more than a gurgle in his throat, but it was enough to make Rhys spring up and seize



him by the bit. He led him down the sloping side of the old quarry, dragging Mary with him, and the three stood together at the bottom, Rhys in his shirt-sleeves, holding his coat over the animal's head. The trot of horses came near as they waited stock-still and breathless in their shelter ; evidently the riders, whoever they were, would pass very near, and the sound of voices was audible between them and the direction of the Dipping-Pool. The horse began to stamp about.

"Mary," whispered Rhys, "they're coming close past us and they must see this brute. Do you lie down flat by the wall and I'll mount and meet them. I'll be bound they are lost in the mist and will think I am in the same plight. I can lead them a bit wide of here, and, when they're passed, go you home. I'll get on to Masterhouse ; it's late, and I'd have to be leaving you in any case."

"But," she said anxiously, as though there had been no interruption, "you haven't answered me. Tell me ; it's to be soon, oh ! isn't it ?"

"After the toll-gate business," he answered. She held up her face and they kissed each other ; then he hurried on his coat, threw himself into the saddle and disappeared over the top of the quarry.

He rode straight to the right across the path by which he judged the riders to be advancing. As they came upon him, he slackened his pace and stood, as though irresolute which way to take. The new-comers pulled up and hailed him. "Hoy ! sir !" shouted the foremost of the two.

He turned and saw a man, some years younger than himself, followed by another, whom at a rapid glance he took to be his servant. The master seemed little more than a boy ; he had a young, fresh face, and curly hair flattened in rings upon his forehead by the moisture of the air. He might have stood for an equestrian statue of frank and not too intellectual youth. The servant carried a valise, and was mounted on an elderly-looking flea-bitten grey.

"I have lost myself in this infernal mist," observed the young



fellow, coming towards him, as he had hoped, and leaving the quarry on his left.

"Indeed, sir! So have I," replied Rhys.

"Plague on it for that," he went on, "for now you can't tell me which way to go."

Walters smiled a little. "I don't know where you are bound for," he remarked.

The other laughed out.

"Lord! I had forgotten that. Well then, my name is Harry Fenton, and I am going down to my father's at Waterchurch." He said this all in a breath, as though anxious to get it out and go on to more, if need be.

"Then you are Squire Fenton's son, of Waterchurch Court," said Rhys, who had suspected his identity ever since he came in sight.

"Yes, that's who I am. And who are you?"

The social standing of this competent-looking man puzzled him hugely. Curiosity and admiration, too, struggled within him like dogs on a leash, while good manners kept a faltering hold on the string. "Excuse me, sir," he added, reddening, "if I am impertinent."

"Not at all, sir," replied the other; "my name is Rhys Walters." This information seemed to convey something to the younger man, for he opened his eyes very wide and looked eagerly at his companion.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "then you are Walters of Great Masterhouse." Then he reddened again as he remembered that he was talking to a farmer whom he did not know, and had omitted the "Mister."

"At your service," said Rhys.

"It's surprising to find *you* lost," observed Harry, treading as accidentally upon the truth as if it had been a lady's dress.

Rhys smiled, this time internally. Like a devout lover he loved strategy, even more for herself than for what she might bring him.



"I have heard that you know your way in places where no one else does," continued young Fenton.

"Masterhouse is so near the mountain that one has to be pretty sharp these dark nights. But I've been baffled this time. However, I have a suspicion where we are now. With your leave, sir, I'll go with you for a little and put you on the right track."

"I should like that very much," said Harry, gratefully, "but my home and yours lie so far apart that it would be taking you much out of your road."

"The mist is clearing, so that, when I've left you, I can canter home in twenty minutes. It will be no trouble."

"Oh, thank you indeed; I am afraid my poor mother will think I am bogged, or have fallen in with Rebecca; women are always nervous," said the boy, with a male air which was entirely lost on Rhys. At the mention of women his thoughts had flown to the quarry hard by, and he was anxious to push on and leave the coast clear for Mary's escape.

They went steadily forward, side by side, the elder man steering west along the plateau, to where the lanes began to run down to Crishowell, the younger riding unquestioning alongside. The servant jogged quietly along in the rear.

"That's a good-looking nag you have under you, Mr. Walters," remarked Harry, when they had gone some way, "and he seems in good condition too."

Rhys pinched the bay's neck critically.

"Not bad," he said. "Yes, he's a nice little beast. I like him as well as any I've got."

"Ah," said Harry, "and I suppose you have plenty more like him." He sighed wistfully, remembering his fellow-traveller's reputed wealth. He loved horses dearly, but though he was Squire Fenton's eldest son, the one he was riding represented his whole stud. While there were Bob and Tom and Llewellyn to be provided for, he had to do as best he could with one, and Bob and Tom and Llewellyn shared his



tastes. Not that he grudged his brothers anything, for he was much too generous, but he could not help envying the man beside him. He wished, too, that he had something to serve as a yeomanry charger besides his own horse, for, by all accounts, there would be work soon. That was what was bringing him home.

"There have been tremendous doings at Carmarthen," he remarked, after a pause.

"Yes," said Rhys, quietly, "and I suppose we shall soon see the same here. I believe the yeomanry are to come out too. There's a great raid pending in these parts."

"That's what I have come down for," replied his companion, a glow of interest rising in his face. "They'll have us out at last, and I hope we shall get some fun for our pains. Have you heard much about it?"

"It's a good deal talked of. They talk too much, these rioters," replied Rhys with a short laugh, riding up closer to Fenton. "Never you mind, sir, how I know it, but know it I do. It's to take place before long, and it's to be the Wye gate, down by the river at Llangarth."

"By Gad! is it? Well, we'll come out as strong as we can and be a match for the whole crew. You are a yeomanry man, aren't you?"

"No, I am not. Though I have often thought——"

"Ah, but you'll come out, surely Mr. Walters!" interrupted Harry, cutting the sentence short, "a man like you, with the Lord knows how many horses and men!"

"I should dearly like it," answered Rhys, "but I am going to Abergavenny very soon, and I cannot tell when I may have to be off. It's an urgent matter. It may just fall out that I'm at Abergavenny when I most want to be here; and I can't put it off either, or go till I'm sent for."

"What a monstrous pity!" There was vexation in Harry's voice. Besides his zeal for law and order as exemplified by fighting and pursuing, he was strongly attracted by this man and longed to see more of him.



They had come down the side of a straggling thorn hedge, and now, at its angle, they halted by a gate.

"Now," said Rhys, "this lane will take you down into Crishowell. There's no mist below, if I know anything, and you'll see your way to Waterchurch easily. So here we will part."

The boy held out his hand.

"A thousand thanks for your company," he said cordially.

"And you won't fail us if you can help it, will you?"

"If it's possible to be there, I'll be there somehow," was the reply.

And in that Rhys Walters spoke truth.



## CHAPTER V

### REBECCA

As though to drop connection with its predecessor and to start the world afresh, the new year brought a change of weather. The wind, which for some time had lain in the south-west, was veering round to the east, and the sodden earth was drying herself rapidly. Rheumatism was becoming a less general theme for conversation in Crishowell, and people's clothes were again seen hanging out to dry in gardens. Forlorn-looking strings, which had stretched nakedly from pole to pole, now upheld smocks, petticoats, and well-patched trouser-legs, whose active prancings in the breeze almost made the spectators' legs leap in sympathy. Four or five old men, whose goings-out and comings-in gauged the state of the barometer as accurately as if they had been occupants of pasteboard "weather-houses," were to be met about; and Bumpett, the pig-driver, whose excursions into foreign parts a few miles away made him an authority on all matters, opined that a frost was not far off. He also added that the roads would be "crewell hard" by the Wye toll-gate, and that we "should see what we should see." This information made the women look mysterious and snub those of their sex who had not been observed in talk with the great man; the men said less, though they smoked their pipes in a more chastened manner.

Meanwhile, the storm which had been brewed over the Dipping-Pool fire was ready to burst.

In a steep upland lane, about nine o'clock one evening, a



little band of horsemen was coming quietly down towards the valley. The high banks crowned with ragged hazel on either hand and the darkness around (for the moon was not due for an hour or so) made it difficult to distinguish who or what they were. As gaps in the bank let in a little extra illumination, and stars began to assert themselves over the dispersing clouds, it could be seen that they were about twenty-five in number, and that all, with one exception, wore masks. They were fairly well mounted, and the strange person who kept a few yards ahead of the rest rode an animal which any one, knowing even a little about a horse, would have picked out at a glance. She was a liver-chestnut mare just under sixteen hands, with a shoulder such as was rarely to be found in the motley crowd of horseflesh at local fairs. Youth and a trifle of inexperience were noticeable in her among the sober-stepping and sturdy beasts following, and she mouthed her ring-snaffle as she went. Her long bang tail swung at each stride, and her length of pastern gave her pace an elasticity like that of a Spanish dancer.

But if the mare was a remarkable figure in the little procession, her rider was immeasurably more so, being, apparently, the tallest female who had ever sat in a saddle. Her long cloak and voluminous brown skirt fell in a dark mass against the beast's sides, giving her figure a seeming length and height double that of any of her companions. On her head she wore a large sun-bonnet, tied securely over a shock of hair which looked false even in the scant light; the lower part of her face was muffled in her cloak, so that but little feature could be seen. The strange woman rode astride, and, as an occasional puff of wind lifted her skirt, it revealed leggings and boots; one lean, brown hand on the rein was visible under the concealing drapery, and the other carried a heavy thorn stick. From under the shock of hair looked the eyes of Rhys Walters.

The whole company was formed of the same material which had met in the inn kitchen the day after Christmas, with



several additions and with the exception of Johnny Watkins, whose heart had failed him at the last moment, and of Charley Turnbull, who was nowhere to be seen. Hosea Evans was there, unrecognizable in his black mask and cropped whiskers, for he had parted with a portion of these adornments, fearing that they might betray him. He had hesitated to shave entirely, lest people should be too curious about his reasons for doing so, and had merely trimmed them into less conspicuous limits with the scissors.

Every one was armed in some fashion or another. Sticks were the principal weapons, though two or three carried pitchforks, and one of the more ambitious spirits displayed an antiquated horse-pistol which he would have been sorely put about to fire. A few of Rebecca's followers were afoot, and had brought with them a crowbar and a couple of serviceable mallets. These went more slowly behind the horses.

The element of burlesque which pervaded the affair was not lost upon Rhys, and it cooled him a little as he rode along, to think what a ridiculous troop he was heading. His own garments, too, offended him greatly, and he would have discarded them at the beginning, had he not been sure that some one else would have put them on, and, with them, assumed leadership of the band. He secretly determined to get rid of them as best he might, when the night's work should begin.

Crishowell village was in the centre of a loop which the Brecon road made round it, and when the first few lights it contained at that hour were visible in front, the party turned into the fields, avoiding its vicinity and straggling along by hedges and by such cover as was available. The highway lay like a grey ribbon in the starlight, and they had the good fortune to cross it without meeting a human being; only a prowling fox sneaked up one of the ditches as they passed. They then entered the lane which opened before them, and, down it, made for the other side of the loop, for there, just at its end, stood the toll.

At a bend of the way, Walters ran into a rider who was



coming to meet them, and the sudden stop which this caused in the narrow place had the effect of bringing every one smartly up against his predecessor's tail. As the new-comer was caught sight of by the huddled-up pack, a loud laugh burst from all and made the empty lane ring.

"Be quiet," cried Rhys angrily, under his breath. "You fools! can't you keep from waking the whole place with your noise? Good God! what sort of a tom-fool have we here?"

Before the astonished young man stood a travesty of himself, dress, dark cloak, sun-bonnet, and all, the only additions being a mask and a white woollen comforter, one end of which hung down over a substantial back. The rotund cheeks of its wearer swelled out the bonnet, the strings of which were drawn almost to suffocation. The voice of Charley Turnbull escaped, with apparent difficulty, from these surroundings.

Since the evening at the Dipping-Pool, Turnbull had been in a state of the most cruel and poignant distress. Steven's remark had brought home to him, too late, the truth that women's clothes would be a more effectual disguise than all the masks and mufflers in the world; with keen vexation he realized that he had overlooked that. The police's likelihood to pursue the ringleader at all costs was nothing to him, for he was a man of few ideas, and liable, when he had one, to make the most of it, to the exclusion of all others. That sentence, "Woman's clothing be a fine protection," rang in his ears from morning till night, and, what was worse, from night till morning.

As the days rolled on his agony increased. Often he was on the verge of breaking out of the project altogether, but thoughts of the jeers which would assail him robbed him even of the courage to do that. Finally, he came upon a plan to meet his difficulties, the result of which now brought him face to face with Rebecca and thus attired.

"Here I am, Mr. Walters, sir," he began, "and I hope you won't take it ill o' me that I be come lookin' so like yourself. You see, it were this way. I says to myself, I says——"



"Come on, come on," interrupted Rhys, "we must be moving. And be quiet behind there, if you can. We are getting near the road."

"I says to myself," went on Turnbull, keeping abreast of the mare's walk at the risk of being jogged to pieces, "there's Mrs. Walters, I says, a God-fearing lady as ever stepped. What would she do if aught was to happen to you, sir? Ah, Master Rhys, we must think o' them at home. So then, I thought this way—if there be two of us, them as be after us won't know who to get hold on, they won't indeed. So you see——"

"Yes, yes, I understand," exclaimed the other, exasperated beyond bearing; "for God's sake, get behind and let me be. We're pretty nigh in sight of the lane's end."

A little way down the Brecon road, not more than a couple of furlongs off, rose the dark mass of the toll-house, its slates here and there catching the starlight. Indistinct black bars could be seen crossing the highway; above them burned the steady flame of the toll-gate light.

It was perfectly still, and not a footstep was to be heard coming or going as Rhys pulled up. Several of the men, small farmers principally, crowded round; their hearts were in the matter, and their eager faces looked steadfastly towards him through the fog of horses' breath which the fast-approaching frost was making. To them the matter was sober earnest, and they meant to see it through to the end; the burlesque view of it occurred to them not at all. Those with the mallets and crowbar pressed up.

"Give me a stone, Price."

One of the men picked up a flint. Rhys took it and turned in his saddle; he was getting excited himself. "Come after me down the grass," he said, "and when you see the light go out, fall to."

They cantered down the roadside to within a few yards of the toll-house, and paused.

Then they saw Rebecca's cloaked arm go up, a stone whizzed



through the air, there was a smash of splintering glass, and the light went out.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the same time another little body of horse and foot was gathered in no very patient frame of mind a couple of miles off. The Wye toll-gate in Llangarth stood at the beginning of the great bridge spanning the river on the north side of the town, and, as it had been rumoured that Rebecca was to make her descent upon that place, all the police available were waiting there on foot as well as about twenty horsemen picked from the flower of the Hereford yeomanry.

The latter were cooling their heels in the courtyard of the Bull Inn, which stood a little back from the street, while the police hung in a group round the side door of that establishment, some member of the force now and then moving off to look up the road for sign of the approaching rioters or for anything to break the monotony of their vigil. For six nights now they had been assembled in the same place with no more exciting termination than being marched to the Police Station and dismissed in the early morning, and they were getting heartily tired of the experience. An occasional stamp from a horse or a long-drawn yawn from one of the men was heard above the soft steady roar of the Wye, which was shallow below the bridge and purred like a contented animal over the shingle. The landlady looked out of a back window on her way to bed, holding her hand before the tallow-candle she carried. The light shone red through her fingers as she glanced out upon the gallant figure of Harry Fenton, whose smart uniform showed plainly in the glow streaming from the inn door upon the yard. It was the first time she had ever seen him, as Waterchurch lay some way off, and he had been much from home of late years.

Quarter to ten sounded from Llangarth Church, and a sergeant of police went to have another look up the quiet street. Harry gave his horse to the man next him to hold and strolled after him, the landlady at the window admiring



the clank of his sword and the attractive jingle he made as he went.

As the two men stood at the corner, the silence of the street was broken by an uneven clattering, and a boy, much out of breath and weighted by an extremely heavy pair of country boots, came rushing towards them over the cobbles. Harry caught him as he was about to pass the courtyard. The boy tried to speak, but for want of breath was obliged to desist.

"Who is he?" asked Harry of the sergeant.

The policeman took him by the shoulder and turned him round as unceremoniously as if he had been a spinning-top, displaying the purple face of a boy about eleven years old.

"You're Howell Seaborne, as works for the parson of Crishowell, aren't you?" said the man. "Howlie, they call him, sir."

"Ya'as a' be. Can't you leave oi alone, 'stead o' shoikin' that woy?"

"Wait a minute, give him breath," said young Fenton.

The boy turned a pair of light, prominent eyes on the speaker, and, at the same time, saw his uniform and the soldiers in the yard. He thrust a grimy forefinger towards them.

"It's them oi be come for!" he exclaimed, as he regained his wind. "Oi were down in Crishowell Loine, doin' no 'arm, and oi see them comin'—comin' all of a string wi' sticks an' guns——"

"But who? What?"

"Fifty men roiding an' a great woman."

"When? Where?" cried Harry, catching hold of him much more roughly than the sergeant had done.

"Yew're 'urtin' me, sir," whined the boy. "Oi shan't tell nothin' till yew leave go."

Fenton took away his hand with a gesture of irritation. "Come on, no nonsense," he said, "tell me at once, where were you?"



"Down in the loine by Crishowell. They be all gone down to the goite on the Brecon road ; an' oi've been runnin' fit to burst to fetch the soljers. It's Rebecca, it is."

In two minutes the yeomanry were dashing out of the court, the police holding by the soldiers' stirrups, meaning to keep up with them as long as they could, and to drop off when the pace should become too much for them. The boy flattened himself against the wall as they went by. When they were round the corner, he tied up a loose bootlace and looked about him. Then he went to a pump which stood on one side and jerked the handle ; a stream of water flowed out as he put his head underneath and let it run copiously over his face. He had large front teeth and a retreating chin, and, in the cascade, he looked not unlike a drowning rabbit. When he had finished, he snuffled two or three times, rubbed his countenance with his coat-sleeve, and set out from the Bull yard at a steady jog-trot. How he could run at all in the boots he wore was a mystery, but long practice, no doubt, had made it possible.

When the soldiers had turned along the road to Brecon and got clear of the town, the police had, one by one, succumbed to the pace and might be seen upon the highway in threes and fours, stepping out as best they might.

The riders kept to the grass as Rhys had done, partly to muffle the sound of hoofs, and partly because the roads were fast hardening, and in some places had become actually slippery. The little wind there was was beginning to sting their ears, and the stars above to flash in the frost. The clouds had rolled completely off and lay in a dark bank along the western horizon ; the night got gradually lighter. Harry and a senior officer rode a little ahead, neither saying a word to the other ; their eyes were fixed on the stretch of road in front, and they breathed hard. Far behind, the constables pressed along with that hopeless feeling in their legs which the sight of retreating horses creates. Last of all toiled Howlie Seaborne in his big boots.



As Harry and his companion came round a slight bend, a sound, which, so far, had been but an unintelligible vibration, struck on their ears with meaning. The blows of heavy mallets were distinct, though the wind went from them to the dark mass which surged and swayed over the road in front. Lights were flashing from the toll-house, and the voices of men rose and fell above the noise of struggling hoofs. The two officers took their horses by the heads and drove in their spurs.

"Fenton," said the elder man as they separated a few minutes later, in the midst of the mob, "whatever we do, let us get Rebecca."

By the time the yeomanry arrived, the little crowd which had seen Rhys put out the light had swelled considerably, and people, hearing the noise, had rushed from neighbouring cottages, catching up pitchforks or any weapons they could lay hands upon. A brisk fight was in full swing; Rhys' blood was up, and he had torn off the sun-bonnet and his voluminous garments and turned his high coat collar up over the lower part of his face. The false hair, which had been so securely fastened that it had refused to come off with his head-gear, hung low over his eyes, giving him a wild appearance which fitted his violent gestures and the tumultuous scene around him.

When Harry came up and saw him in the thick of the struggle, never for one moment did he suspect that the rebel before him was the man who had ridden with him through the mist scarcely a week before. As his friend's injunction about Rebecca reached him he looked eagerly around for some likeness to a female figure, but could see no trace of any such person, Charley Turnbull having, as the fight increased, ensconced himself safely behind an outhouse, where he stood unseen but ready to fly at any moment.

The rioters had been so much taken up with their work, and the turmoil had been so great, that it was as though a bolt were falling on them from heaven when they saw the



yeomanry coming. Five or six of the mounted assailants had been forming a protection for those who were engaged in breaking up the gate with their tools, and among these was Rhys, with Hosea beside him. As their opponents charged at them and tried to dislodge them with their pitchforks, he leaned down from the young mare's back and dealt sounding blows right and left. Blood was running from a wound in his knee, but he cared nothing for that, for the rage for fight was in his heart as he laid about him, the mare plunging now and then and forcing back the press before her.

Among those who were valiantly protecting the toll was Mary Vaughan's father, the toll-keeper, a tall white-haired old man, whose great height and flowing beard made him a central figure in the mob. He had stood in front of his gate until overpowering numbers had forced him from his place, and now was charging bravely at Walters and his followers. Suddenly a cry rose from the defenders, "The soldiers! The soldiers!" and Rhys saw his men waver for a moment at the sound. "One more," he shouted to those with the mallets. "Down with the gate!"

There was now only one post left standing, and the insurgents turned upon it at his cry for a last blow before they should scatter in front of the impending yeomanry and take to the country. The toll-keeper, dropping his pitchfork, threw himself like a game old bull-dog upon Rhys' foot and tried to drag him from the saddle. Hosea gave a shout as Rhys turned round. The two men's arms whirled simultaneously in the air, and two violent blows descended upon Vaughan; as Rhys struck out, a lump of mud and stone whizzed sharply in his face, and his stick came down upon the toll-keeper's shoulder. Evans' blow struck him full on his grey head, and, with a groan, the old man fell, as he had stood, at the foot of his shattered gate-post.

Hosea saw what he had done and was seized with terror, but his native cunning did not desert him; the advantage



of Rhys' near presence was plain. "Oh, Mr. Walters, you have killed him," he cried loudly.

It was all the work of a moment. Rhys dashed the mud from his eyes and saw the senseless heap on the ground before him; and behind, two or three yeomen who were fighting their way towards him. With an oath, he sprang desperately through the mob and turned the mare's head straight for the Black Mountain.



## CHAPTER VI

### A DEAD MAN AND A LIVE COWARD

WHILE Harry's brother officer was leaning over the dead man on the ground, Charley Turnbull was in terrible difficulties in an adjacent field behind the toll-house. As he heard the sound of hoofs he guessed that the yeomanry was coming up, and he stole, with a trembling heart, across the grass to where a gap in the hedge promised safe egress on to the Brecon road. If he could but reach it without being seen, he would have a good furlong's start. The gates from field to field were locked, he knew, and, being so, presented insurmountable obstacles to a man of his temperament. He urged his old black horse along as silently as he could, trying the while to unfasten the strings of his bonnet, which, in truth, were almost choking him ; but his fingers were all thumbs, and his heart beat so violently that he felt almost as if it would throw him from his unaccustomed saddle. Turnbull never rode if he could help it.

As he reached the gap he left off pulling at his sun-bonnet, for he needed both hands with which to hold on to the reins. The horse cocked his ears, blew a long, snorting breath, and seemed anxious to test with his nose the sort of place he was asked to negotiate. Seeing the little ditch which divided the hedge from the road, he stuck out his forelegs stiffly in front of him, and snorted yet louder ; he was a large, gross horse, with bunches of hair on his fetlocks, and his voice tallied with his appearance. Turnbull, in an agony lest the sound should reach the toll, where things were getting much quieter, gave him an angry blow. The beast started forward, pecked,



crashed sideways through a stiff bit of wattle on one side of the gap, and landed by a miracle upon his ample feet in the hardest part of the road.

The yeomanry officer, while his men were scattered in pursuit of the rioters, was still giving instructions to the police over Vaughan's body, when he heard a breaking of wood, and saw Charley's fat figure coming almost headlong through the gap. Howlie Seaborne, staring round-eyed at the scene by the gate, looked up on hearing the sound. The long trot from the courtyard of the Bull Inn had told somewhat upon his appearance, which was a little more dishevelled than before.

"There a' be!" he shouted. "There a' be! That be Walters—'im as is Rebecca! Did yew 'ear Evans a-croin' out?"

The officer knew that Harry was in pursuit of the murderer—whoever he might be—for he had seen him forcing his way after the big man who had made towards the hill. He had not heard Hosea's cry, but Howlie's words were enough; there, at any rate, was the very ringleader of the band, barely half a furlong off. He mounted quickly.

Charley had just presence of mind enough to pull his horse's head towards Brecon, to cling with all his strength to the mane till he had righted himself in the saddle, and to set off at as great a pace as his underbred beast could muster. All that he could think of was those clattering hoofs gaining on him from the toll-gate, and his fear of the animal under him was as nothing to his fear of the man behind. Where he should make for he neither knew nor cared; flight—blessed flight—that was all that his scattered senses could picture. Again and again he struck his horse; use his heels he could not, for the simple reason that his wide skirt had got entangled in the stirrups as he came through the gap, and held his legs firmly bound to the leathers. Half-a-mile had not passed before his pace began to slacken, and, thrash as he might, he could not get the black horse to keep up the gallop at which he had started. Besides,



he was getting breathless himself. The rider behind shot alongside, shouting to some one yet in the rear, and a strong hand jerked the bridle out of his convulsive grasp.

"I've got him!" cried the yeomanry captain exultantly to his follower as they pulled up, "Sergeant, jump off and have him out of the saddle. It's Walters of Great Masterhouse—I thought he was a better horseman than that!"

The sergeant dismounted and seized the prisoner round the waist, but he clung like a limpet to the horse's neck. Finally, a strong pull brought him heavily down in the road. Both man and officer burst into a peal of laughter.

"Sir, sir," said the stifled voice from the ground, "I swear to Heaven, sir, I be'ant he. Indeed, indeed, I were just pushed sore against my will into this night's work."

"Who is the fellow?" asked the captain, when he had finished laughing. "The boy said he was Walters."

The sergeant took out a knife and ripped the bonnet-strings apart; mask and bonnet fell together.

"It's Charles Turnbull, sir," he said, grinning widely. "Turnbull the auctioneer at Waterchurch village."

"Are you sure it's not Walters?" said the captain, who had never seen Rhys.

"No, no, sir, indeed I be'ant," cried the auctioneer, scrambling to his feet, and stumbling helplessly in the skirt. "Rhys Walters o' Masterhouse was dressed the same as me, but he's off. Riding for his neck he is. I never struck a blow, sir, that I didn't, for I were behind the toll-house, lookin' on, and I says to myself——"

"That'll do," said the captain shortly. "Now then, sergeant, up with him again; you can leave his clothes as they are, for the police will want to see all that. Pick up that thing on the ground."

The sergeant picked up the sun-bonnet with another grin, and then hoisted Turnbull into the saddle.

"You can pull the reins over the horse's head and lead him," said the officer, "he is not likely to try and escape. He hasn't



got courage enough even for that. And now for the lock-up at Llangarth."

As the three started to retrace their steps towards the town, the bell from the church steeple rang out half-past ten; the sound floated out in their direction, for the chill east wind carried it sharply along the highway. The captain turned up the collar of his cloak, and wished that he were at home in his comfortable quarters with the blankets snugly over him. To trot was out of the question, for the auctioneer, having no reins to hold on by, and possessing no other means of securing himself on horseback, would inevitably come to grief, while he, the officer, was now responsible for his safety until he should deliver him into other hands at Llangarth. The sergeant hooked Turnbull's reins over his arm, and blew upon his unoccupied fingers.

"It's getting mighty cold, sir," he hazarded.

"We can't get on any faster with this bundle of old clothes to look after," said the captain crossly; "if you keep your mouth shut, the cold won't go down your throat."

His temper was not improved by the prospect of the next couple of miles at a foot's pace, and the toll was only just coming in sight. The road between them and it was dull and straight, and seemed interminable to two of the riders, Turnbull alone having no great desire to get to the end of the journey.

A deathly silence surrounded the ruins of the gate as they reached it at last, and only a couple of figures were moving near the house in that odd, diffused light which precedes moonrise, and which was beginning to touch up the eastern sky. To one of these, which proved on inspection to be Howlie Seaborne, the captain gave his reins as he dismounted. A light could be seen burning through the diamond-paned window. He put his foot on the plinth and looked in, but a half-drawn dimity curtain, and a pot in which a geranium was struggling for life, prevented his seeing what was passing inside. Stepping down again, he turned to the door, and, as it was



ajar, pushed it softly open and went in. After one look at the room he removed his busby, and stood holding it in his hand.

A low bedstead made of unpolished wood had been drawn into the middle of the floor. The patchwork quilt which covered it trailed upon the carpetless flags, and had evidently been brought in a hurry from some more pretentious bed to spread upon this one. Upon it was the dead figure of the toll-keeper. He lay there waiting for the arrival of a magistrate from Llangarth, straight and still, as he would lie waiting for that other Judge who would one day come to judge his cause. He had wrought well, and his hands, laid simply by his sides, were still clenched. A dark bruise on his left temple from which the blood had oozed made a purple patch on his white, set face. His hair, grey, though abundant, was stained with blood; a pair of strong boots were on his feet, and the pipe he had just been smoking when he rushed out to meet the rioters was still in his pocket. Near him was the stick he had caught up from its corner by the door as he went, for a constable had found it by his body on the road and had brought it in. It had left its mark upon several skins that night.

Vaughan was a widower, his wife having been dead some years, but one of those nondescript female relations who rise up to stop gaps in the lives of the poor was in the house, and, as the yeomanry officer came in, she was blowing up the flickering fire with a pair of brass-bound bellows. A constable who had been left to watch the body sat in the background.

The captain stood silent, his shadow cast by the spasmodic firelight almost filling the small room. Everything was so still; the sound of the bellows jarred on the stillness; the trivial, persistent noise was like an insult to the presence which was there. He turned sternly to the woman at the hearth; her elbow rose and fell as she looked at him over her shoulder, the flames playing on the outline of her face. The constable in the distance coughed and spat.

A rush of sharp air came in at the door, and the bellows



faltered for a moment, then went on again with redoubled vigour. The woman nodded towards the threshold.

"That be she—his daughter," she explained as she turned again to the fire.

The soldier drew reverently back as a girl entered and sprang past him. She sat down on the flags by the bedside and took the dead man's hand in her own two hands. Not a tear was in her eyes; she only gasped like a trapped animal, and the man listening could see how her lips opened and shut. The sound of the bellows drowned everything. He strode to the hearth and shook the woman violently by the arm. "For God's sake, put away that infernal thing," he said.

She rose from her knees and hung up the bellows in the chimney-corner, the fire-irons clattering as she searched about among them for the hook. When he looked round again he saw that the girl had fainted and was lying face downwards on the floor.

He turned to the bellows-blower, who, now that her occupation had ended, was standing idle by the fire; she took but little heed of what had happened.

"You had better do something for her," he suggested after a pause. "Isn't there another room that we could take her to? Poor thing, I can carry her there."

"She's a shameless wench," said the woman without moving.

He went to the bedside and raised Mary in his arms. "Go on," he ordered, nodding decisively towards the door at the back of the room, and the woman went sullenly forward, while he followed with his burden.

He laid the girl in a large wooden chair which was almost the only piece of furniture to be seen. Kneeling by her, he rubbed her palms until her eyelids opened vacantly, and she tried to sit up. As recollection dawned in her eyes she gave a sob, hiding her face.

"He's dead, he's dead," she murmured more to herself than to her companions.

"Aye, he be dead," responded the elder woman in her



uncompromising voice, "and afore you've had time to bring him to disgrace too."

"Sir, sir," faltered Mary, turning to the captain, "how was it? How——?"

"Rhys Walters did it," interrupted the woman shortly, "he killed him. Ah—he'll swing for it yet."

Mary got up like a blind person. Her hands were stretched out before her, and she walked straight to the wall till her face touched it. She put up her arms against it, and stood there like an image; only her two hands beat slowly upon the whitewashed stone.

"'Twould be well if she had a ring on one o' they hands o' hers," observed the woman.

The scene was so painful that the man who was a participator in it could endure it no longer. Pity for the dead man who lay in the dignity of a death bravely come by, was swallowed up in pity for the poor young creature before him. One had faced death, the other had yet to face life. The two little hands beating against the wall, the hard, stupid face of the woman, the cheerless room, all were too horrible to a man of his disposition to be gone through with any longer. He could do nothing for Mary if he stayed, though he could not help feeling cowardly at leaving her to face the first moments of her grief with such a companion. A flutter of icy wind came through a broken pane near him, and his horse out in the road stamped once or twice; his mind ran towards the inn at Llangarth, and he thought of the bright, warm light in the bar.

"Here," he said, holding out half-a-sovereign to the woman, "and mind you look after her."

As he passed through the kitchen where the toll-keeper lay, his eye fell upon the bellows, and he shuddered. "Poor girl," he said, "poor wretched girl."

Howlie Seaborne was one of those rare persons whose silences are as eloquent as their speech. While the owner of the horse he held was in the toll-house, he stood placidly by its head, his eyes fixed upon the prisoner's face; he grinned steadily.



The formation of his mouth was unusual, for, while other people's smiles are horizontal, so to speak, his, owing to his rabbit-teeth, was almost vertical.

At last Turnbull looked angrily at him. "'Twas you cried out I was Rhys Walters," he said with a malignant glance.

If Howlie heard the words, there was no sign of the fact on his changeless countenance ; his one idea appeared to be to see as much of the auctioneer as he could.

"I'll remember this some day," continued Turnbull ; "do ye mind the hiding I gave ye at Crishowell auction last year? Well, ye'll get another o' the same sort."

"Oi do," replied Howlie, his words leaving his grin intact ; "if oi hadn't, yew moightn't be a-settin' up there loike a poor zany, an' on yew're road to the joil."

Turnbull grew purple. "I'll do for ye yet," he said thickly.

At this moment the officer came out and got on his horse, throwing a copper to the boy as he let the bridle go.

"You're a young fool, for all that," he observed as the coin rang upon the road ; "*that's* not Walters of Masterhouse."

"Naw," answered Howlie, his gaze still fixed upon the auctioneer.

As the three men rode on towards Llangarth his boots could be heard toiling heavily up Crishowell Lane.



## CHAPTER VII

### TO ABERGAVENNY

THAT the toll-gate raid would end in a murder was the last thing expected by Rhys. In all the riots which had taken place since the beginning, nothing worse had happened than broken limbs and bruised bodies, such having been the luck of Rebecca and her followers that only a few captures of unimportant hangers-on had been made. Indeed, it is likely that without Howlie's unseasonable prowlings and recognition of his adversary Turnbull, and his determination to pay off old scores, the matter might have had no greater consequences than the terrifying of society in general and the building up of a new gate.

As Rhys took the young mare by the head, and turned out of the crowd, a man who had been some way from Hosea when he shouted, was so much demoralized by the cry, that his hand, almost on one of the rioters' collars, dropped to his side. In a flash there came back to Harry Fenton the evening he had strayed in the mist round the spurs of the Black Mountain, and his eyes were opened. This tall, shock-headed figure which was scattering the people right and left as it made for Crishowell Lane was the man he had ridden beside and talked to so frankly in the innocence of his soul. With wrath he remembered how much he had admired his companion, and how apparent he had allowed his interest to become. He had returned home full of talk about his new acquaintance, his good-nature in turning out of his road for a stranger, his fine seat on horseback, and now it made the boy's face hot to think how



Rhys must have laughed in his sleeve as his victim had fallen into the trap laid for him. He had been put on the wrong scent by the very ringleader of the mischief he had come so far to help in preventing. His wounded vanity ached ; he had been tricked, bested, mocked, deceived. There was only one solace for him, and that was action, action which would not only be his refuge, but his bounden duty. He almost jerked the bit out of his horse's mouth as he wrenched his head round and shot after his enemy, through the crowd and up the resounding highway on the young mare's heels.

Rhys' start was not great—about fifty yards—and Harry thought with satisfaction that he was better mounted than usual. His brother Llewellyn had lent him his horse, one lately bought, and the best that either of the young men had ever had. As long as the animal under him could go, so long would he never lose sight of that devil in front, if both their necks should break in the attempt. He would give Llewellyn anything, everything—all he possessed or ever would possess—if he might only lay hands on the man who had cheated him and whose high shoulders now blocked his view of the starlit horizon which seemed to lie just at the end of the open highway.

Rhys swung into the lane, and, once between the hedges, he drove in his heels ; the road turned a corner a short way ahead, and he wanted to get round it while he had the lead of Harry. Further on there was a thin place in the hazels on his left, and he meant to get in on the grass, though in reality it took him out of his direct route to the mountain. But the going would be softer, and there was the chance of entangling his enemy in the geography of the trappy little fields.

He did not know which of the uniformed figures that had poured down to the gate was on his track, but he felt an absolute consciousness that the man behind was as determined to ride as he was himself, and he suspected who that man might be. As he came to the bend he looked back to make sure. He could not tell in the uncertain light, but he saw it was war to the knife ; every line of the rider's figure told him



that. He turned the mare short and put her at the bank ; that it was not sound he knew, but the hedge let through a gleam of standing water, and there was not enough resistance in it to turn her over if she made a mistake. She scrambled through, loosening clods of earth with her heels, but the good turf was on the further side, and she got through with a clatter of stones and wattle. They struck to the right across a field, and, when they were well out in the middle, Rhys saw that Harry had landed without losing ground, and he settled himself down to a steady gallop. As he reflected that his goal was nothing less than Abergavenny, and thought of the distance lying before him, he knew that his best plan was to hustle his pursuer while they were in the valley, and trust to his knowledge of hill tracks and precipices when they had left the pastures behind. It would not be a question of pace up there. All the same, fifteen long miles were in front of him, and behind him—manslaughter.

Directly in his way some hundred yards ahead a wide dark patch stretched across the meadow. He knew it to be a piece of boggy ground deep enough to embarrass a horseman, and too well fed by a spring below to freeze, but he also knew the precise spot at which it could be crossed without difficulty. The recent wet weather had made it bigger than usual, and he headed for it, hoping that Fenton would choose a bad bit, and at least take something out of his horse in the heavy clay. In he went, knowing that where there were rushes there was foothold, and keeping his eye on a battered willow-stump which stood like a lighthouse at the further border of the little swamp. A snipe rose from under his feet, a flash of dark lightning whirling in the greyiness of the atmosphere. He was through and making steadily for the line of hedge before him.

But Harry had not hunted for nothing ; ever since his earliest boyhood he had followed hounds on whatever he could get to carry him, and long years of riding inferior beasts had taught him many things. He had never possessed a really perfect hunter in his life, and he was accustomed to saving his animals



by every possible means ; mad with excitement as he was, he instinctively noticed the odd bit of ground, and pulled straight into the mare's tracks. Walters, looking back from an open gate through which he was racing, ground his teeth as he saw how well he had steered his enemy.

Soon the ground began to slope away, and Rhys knew that they were getting near the brook running only a few fields from the road. Just beyond it was Crishowell village, and the land would ascend sharply as soon as they had left the last cottage behind.

The Digedi brook was as unlike the flag-bordered trout-stream of the midlands as one piece of water can be to another, for it rose far up in the Black Mountain near the pass by which Walters hoped to reach Abergavenny, and, after a rapid descent to the valley, passed the village, circling wantonly through the pastures to cross Crishowell Lane under a bridge. There was hardly a yard in its career at which its loud voice was not audible, for the bed was solid rock, and the little falls, scarce a foot high, by which it descended to the lower levels, called ceaselessly among the stones. The water-ousel nested there in spring, and wagtails curtsied fantastically by the brink. In summer it was all babble, light, motion, and waving leaves. As the young man came down the grass, he saw the line of bare bushes which fringed it, and heard the pigmy roar of one of the falls. Flat slabs of rock hemmed it in, jutting into the water and enclosing the dark pool into which it emptied itself. On an ordinary occasion he would have picked his way through the slippery bits and let his horse arrange the crossing as his instinct suggested, but he had no time for that now. He took the mare by the head, and came down the slope as hard as he could towards a place just above the fall. He saw the white horseshoe foaming under him as they cleared it and the boulders on the edge, and he smiled grimly as he pictured Fenton's horse possibly stumbling about among the rocks. He made straight for the highway, the mare's blood was up, and she took the big intervening hedges like a deer.



They were now on the road, and he pulled up for a moment to listen for any sign of his pursuer, but there was no other sound than the barking of a dog in Crishowell. The slippery boulders had probably delayed Harry. He cantered on steadily past the village with its few lighted windows ; as the barking had raised a reply from every dog's throat in the place, no one heard him till he had passed the last outlying house, and he made for the steep lane leading up to where he had parted with Fenton on the night of their first meeting.

It was highly unlikely that he would come across any one at that time of night, for the Crishowell people went early to rest, like all agricultural characters, and the news of Rebecca's attack on the toll could hardly have reached them yet. Now that he had time to think a little, he began to realize the full horror of the thing that had happened. He had killed a man ; worse, he had killed Mary's father ; worse still, it was known that he had done so. Curse Hosea ! curse him ! Why had he been such a madman as to shout out his name ? No one need have identified him but for the inn-keeper's crass folly. What he was going to do he knew not, beyond that he must make for Abergavenny, where he might possibly lie hidden for a time till he could devise some means of leaving the country. Poor little Mary too, his heart smote him as he thought of her ; in one hour she had been robbed of her father, and was losing her lover—losing him as every beat of the mare's hoofs carried him further away towards the great lone mountain that he had to cross that night somehow. He hoped the wet places up there would not have frozen over before he got through the pass, for it was hard underfoot already and the puddles crackled faintly as he rode over them. Every moment it was getting lighter, and he could see a piece of the moon's face above the high banks of the lane. He put his hand down on the mare's shoulder ; she was sweating a good deal, though they had only come a couple of miles at most, but she was raw and excitable, and had pulled him considerably since they had come over the brook, taking more out



of herself than she need have done. She had good blood in her—thank Heaven for that—and she would want it all. He had paid a long price for her,<sup>1</sup> and, if ever money were well spent, it was then ; the young fool behind him was not likely to get much out of his ride. He pulled up once again, just to make sure that Harry was nowhere near, standing in the shadow with his hand over his ear and the mare quivering with excitement under him. Yes, sure enough, there were galloping hoofs distinct on the stillness of the sharp night some way below. Fenton was in the lane.

On they went, sparks flying from the flints as the shoes smote hard upon them. The air grew more chilly as they got higher up and the road more slippery ; Rhys leaned forward, encouraging the mare as she laboured valiantly up the heart-breaking slope. The banks flew by, gates, stiles ; soon they were passing the ruined cottage that stood not a hundred yards from the egress to the mountain ; he could see the bare boughs of the apple-trees that tapped against the battered window-panes.

Suddenly the mare lurched, scraping the earth with her feet, and the moon seemed to sway in the sky and to be coming down to meet the hedge. A crash, and she was lying on her off side with Rhys' leg pinned underneath her. A mark like a slide on the blue, shining ground showed how the frost was taking firm grip of the world.

She struggled up again before he had time to find out whether he was hurt or not, and stood over him, shivering with fright. Fortunately she had hardly touched him in her efforts to rise, as his foot had come out of the stirrup, and he was able to pick himself up in a few seconds with a strong feeling of dizziness and an aching pain in his shoulder. His first idea was to remount as quickly as possible, but, when he put his foot in the iron, he almost fell back again on the road. Something hot was running down his face, first in slow drops, then faster ; he could not raise his right shoulder at all, and his arm felt weary and numb. A gust of wind brought the sound of Harry's galloping fitfully up the lane, making the mare turn



half round to listen, her nostrils dilated ; she seemed quite uninjured. Rhys seized the stick he had dropped as they fell, and, with it in his available hand, struck her two violent blows on her quarter. She plunged forward like a mad creature, and set forth for her stable at Great Masterhouse.

As she disappeared he dragged himself with great difficulty through the hedge on his right. Before him the fields fell away perpendicularly to the valley, and the moon was white on the grass that lay like a frosty, vapoury sheet round him. He saw a deep ditch running downward with the land, and had just sense and strength enough left to stagger towards it, a black, positive silhouette on the moon-struck unreality of the surrounding world.

As he rolled into it he lost consciousness, and so did not hear Harry Fenton a minute later as he tore past.



## CHAPTER VIII

### MASTER AND MAN

A MAN was sitting on the low wall which enclosed the spectre of a garden trimming a ragged ash-plant into the plain dimensions of a walking-stick. He worked with the neatness displayed by many heavy-handed persons whose squarely-tipped fingers never hint at the dexterity dormant in them.

It was easily seen that, in order to assign him a place in the social scale, one would have to go a good way down it; nevertheless, he reflected the facial type of his time as faithfully as any young blood enveloped in the latest whimsies of fashionable convention, though, naturally, in a less degree. The man of to-day who looks at a collection of drawings made in the early nineteenth century can find the face, with various modifications, everywhere; under the chimney-pot hat which (to his eye) sits so oddly on the cricketer, beneath the peaked cap of the mail-coach guard, above the shirt-sleeves of the artisan with his basket of tools on his back. As we examine the portraits of a by-gone master, Sir Peter Lely, Joshua Reynolds—whom you will—we are apt to ask ourselves whether the painter's hand has not conveyed too much of his own mind to the canvas, making all sitters so conform to it as to reproduce some mental trait of his own, like children of one father reproducing a physical one. Those who find this may forget that there is an expression proper to each period, and that it runs through the gamut of society, from the court beauty to the kitchen wench, from the minister of State to the rat-catcher who keeps the great man's property purged of such vermin. The comprehensive glance of the man on the wall as compared with the immobility



of his mouth, the wide face set in flat whiskers which stopped short in a line with the lobe of his ear, dated him as completely as if he had been a waxwork effigy set up in a museum with "Early Victorian Period" printed on a placard at his feet. His name was George Williams, and, in the eye of the law, he was a hedger and ditcher by occupation ; on its blind side, he was something else as well.

The garden, which formed a background to the stick-maker, was indeed a sorry place, forming, with the tumble-down cottage it surrounded, a sort of island in the barren hillside. A shallow stream on its way to the valley ran by so near the wall, that there was only room for a few clumps of thistle between it and the water. When the dweller in the cottage wished to reach civilization, he had to cross a plank to a disused cart-track making from the uplands down to the village. Hardly any one but the tenant of this unprofitable estate ever troubled the ancient way with his presence, but, in spite of this, Williams looked up expectantly now and then to where it cut the skyline a furlong or so mountainwards. Behind him the tall weeds which were choking the potato patch and the gooseberry bushes straggled in the grey forenoon light, and the hoar-frost clung to a few briars that stretched lean arms over the bed of the stream.

The cottage was built of stone and boasted a slate roof, though, what between the gaps showing in it and the stonecrop which covered the solid parts, there was little slate visible. One could assume that the walls were thick from the extreme breadth of the window-sills, and the remote way in which the pane stared out like an eye sunk deep in its socket. The window on the left of the door was boarded up by a shutter which had once been green, the other one being nearly as impenetrable by reason of its distance from the surface. Were any one curious enough to examine the latter, he might see that it was surprisingly clean ; the place was wild, inhospitable, weed-sown, but not dirty. A faint column of smoke escaped from one of the squat chimneys which adorned either end of the roof.

The ash-plant which Williams was trimming had two strong



suckers sticking out of the root. When it was held upside-down, the position in which it would eventually be carried, Nature's intention of making it the distinct image of a rabbit's head was clear to the meanest imagination. George's imagination was not altogether mean, and he whittled away diligently, smiling as the thing grew more life-like in his hands, and so much absorbed that he gradually forgot to watch the track and did not see a small figure coming down it till it was within a few yards of him.

The person arriving on the scene had such a remarkable gait that one might have singled him out from fifty men, had he been advancing in a line of his fellow-creatures instead of alone. As he came closer, it grew odder because the expression of his face could be seen to counteract the expression of his legs. The latter proclaimed indecision, while the former shone with a cheerful firmness ; looking at him, one was prepared to see the legs fold inward like an easel, or widen out like a compass, plunge sideways up the bank, or dive forwards down the road. For this, as for all other phenomena in this world, there was a reason. The man had driven pigs for nearly fifty years of his life.

The healthy red of his cheeks was an advertisement for this disquieting trade, and his twinkling eyes and slit of a mouth turned up at the corners as if they had caught something of their appearance from the pigs themselves. Prosperity cried from every part of James Bumpett, from the seams of his corduroy trousers to the crown of his semi-tall hat. He carried a stick, but he did not use it to walk with, for long habit had made him wave it smartly from side to side.

Williams transferred his legs deferentially from the inside to the outside of the wall as the old man approached, and stood waiting for him to come up.

The Pig-driver seated himself beside him and plunged immediately into his subject.

"Is it aught with the business?" he asked. "I come down at once when I got your message."



"No," replied the younger man, "it's this way. It's about Mr. Walters o' Masterhouse. He's there below—an' his head nigh broke." He pointed backwards to the cottage with his thumb.

"Lord! Lord!" ejaculated Bumpett.

"He told me to send word to you. 'Bumpett,' he says, 'Mr. Bumpett at Abergavenny; don't you forget,' an' he went off with his head agin my shoulder. How I got him along here I don't rightly know. He's a fair-sized man to be hefting about."

The old man looked keenly into George's face.

"What did he want with me?" he inquired.

"Indeed I never thought for to ask him," said Williams simply. "'Twas two nights ago, I was going up by Red Field Farm to look round a bit"—here both men's eyes dropped—"and about one o'clock I was nigh them steep bits o' grazing, an' come straight on to him. Lying down in the ditch he was, not twenty yards from Crishowell Lane. I didn't know what to make of it."

"Well, to be sure!" exclaimed Bumpett. "Was it drink?" he asked after a pause.

"Drink? no!" cried George. "I took a piece of ice from the road and put it on his head. He come to then. I never saw such a look as he give me when he saw me, and he fought like a wild beast, that he did, when he felt my hand on him, though he was as weak as a rabbit when I got him up. 'Tis plain enough now why, though indeed I did wonder then. He's done for Vaughan the toll-keeper, too; knocked him stone dead."

Bumpett stared blankly. For once in his life he was quite taken aback.

"He was out wi' Rebecca," explained Williams. "I guessed that by the strange hair he had tied all over his head so firm it were hard to get it loose."

"What did you do with it?" inquired the Pig-driver sharply.



"Brought it with me," said the young man. "Was I to leave it for some o' they constables to find?"

"Well, indeed," observed Bumpett, "you're a smarter lad than I took ye for. I don't mind telling ye that I thought to see him along o' me in Abergavenny by now."

"You've had to tell me a thing or two before this," said George rather sullenly.

"Ye've told no one?" inquired Bumpett suspiciously.

"Not I," said George. "What's the use of pulling a man out of the law's way if you're to shove him back after? I thought once I'd have to get the doctor, he was that bad, ranting and raving, but he's stopped now."

"I suppose I'd better go down and see him," said the Pig-driver, rubbing the back of his head meditatively with his hand.

"What are we to do with him, Williams?"

"I can't turn him out," answered the young man, "I don't like to do that."

"By G'arge, he couldn't have got into no safer place too," chuckled Bumpett. "We'll keep him a bit, my lad, an' he might lend a hand when he gets better. He'll have to know what sort of a nest he's lighted on, sooner or later, if he stops here."

Williams gave a kind of growl.

"When the country's quieted down a bit we'll have to get him off out o' this. Straight he'll have to go too, and not be talkin' o' what he's seen. Did they take any of the others, did ye hear?"

"They got Turnbull the auctioneer, and about a dozen men from Llangarth; them on the horses were that rigged up wi' mountebank clothes you couldn't tell who was who—so I heard tell in Crishowell. And they were off over the Wye, an' into the woods like so many quists. The yeomanry tried the wrong places in the water, and some of them was pretty nigh drowned. There was no talk of chasing—they'd enough to do pulling one another out."

"Well, well, to be sure!" exclaimed the Pig-driver again



with infinite relish, his cheeks widening into a grin as he listened, and his eyes almost disappearing into his head. Then he sighed the sigh of a man who broods upon lost opportunities.

George whirled his legs back into the garden in the same way that he had whirled them out, and steered through the gooseberry bushes towards the cottage followed by his companion. Entering they found themselves in a small room, dark and bare.

Although smoke might be seen to issue from the chimney at this side of the house, it was curious that not a vestige of fire was in the fire-place. A table stood under the window, a few garments hung on a string that stretched across a corner, and two bill-hooks, very sharp and bright, leaned sentimentally towards each other where they stood against the wall. A piece of soap, a bucket of water, and a comb were arranged upon a box; at the end of the room were a cupboard, and a wooden bedstead containing neither bedclothes nor mattress. Besides these objects, there was nothing in the way of furniture or adornment.

Bumpett glanced round and his eye reached the bedstead.

"Name o' goodness, what have ye done with your bedding?" he inquired, pausing before the naked-looking object.

"It's down below."

A partition divided the cottage into two, and George opened a door in this by which they entered the other half of the building. Chinks in the closed-up window let in light enough to show a few tools and a heap of sacks lying in a corner. These were fastened down on a board which they completely concealed. The Pig-driver drew it aside, disclosing a hole large enough to admit a human figure, with the top of a ladder visible in it about a foot below the flooring. The young man stood aside for Bumpett to descend, and when the crown of the Pig-driver's hat had disappeared, he followed, drawing the board carefully over the aperture.

The room below ran all the length of the house, and a fire



at the further end accounted for the smoke in the chimney. Fresh air came in at a hole in the wall, which was hidden outside by a gooseberry bush planted before it; occasional slabs of stone showed where the place had been hollowed from the original rock, and the ceiling was studded with iron hooks. Near the fire was a great heap of sheepskins, surmounted by George's mattress and all his scanty bedding, on which lay Rhys Walters, his head bound round by a bandage, and a cup of water beside him which he was stretching out his hand for as they entered.

"Here's Mr. Bumpett," announced Williams, going gently up to the bed.

"Well," said Rhys in a weak, petulant voice, "this is a bad look-out, isn't it?"

"Indeed, and so it is," answered the old man, as if he had been struck by a new idea.

"And I don't know when I can get up out of here."

"Bide you where you are," interrupted the Pig-driver. "You couldn't be safer, not if you was in Hereford jail itself," he concluded cheerfully, sitting down on the bed.

Rhys frowned under his bandage.

"That's where I may be yet," he said, "curse the whole business."

"I'd been lookin' out for ye at Abergavenny," said Bumpett, "an' not seein' ye, I thought all had been well, and ye'd gone off licketty smack to Evans's."

"If I could get hold of Evans, I'd half kill him," said Rhys between his teeth. "He cried out my name, and I had to ride for it, I can tell you. Give me a drop more water, Williams."

George went to the opposite wall and drew out a stone, letting in the pleasant babbling noise of the brook. The foundations of the cottage were so near the water that he stretched his arm through, holding the mug, and filled it easily. In flood-time the room was uninhabitable.

"I thought there was nothing that could touch that mare of



mine," continued the sick man, as George went up the ladder and left the two together, "but young Fenton's mind was made up to catch me, though I'd have distanced him if this damned frost hadn't been against me. I could have dodged him in the mountain and got him bogged, maybe."

"Well, well, you're lucky to be where you are," remarked Bumpett. "There's no one but Williams and me do know of this place. Best bide a bit, and when they give up searchin' for ye, ye can get down to Cardiff somehow."

Rhys made no reply; his thoughts went to Great Master-house, to its fields, to the barns round which he had played as a child, to its well-stocked stable, to the money it was worth, and he groaned. He was a beggar practically, an outlaw, and the life behind him was wiped out. Many things rose in his mind in a cloud of regret, many interests but few affections; nevertheless, now that she was absolutely lost to him, he longed for Mary.

For some time neither of the two men spoke.

"'Tis a bad job indeed," broke in Bumpett as he got up to leave. He was a man of his tongue and the silence irked him.

"Where are you going to now?" said Rhys listlessly.

"Down Crishowell way," answered the Pig-driver. "I've got business there. Mr. Walters, I've got a word to say to you afore I go. Do you know that this place you're in belongs to me?"

"To you?" said Rhys; "I thought Williams rented it from Red Field Farm."

"Ah, 'tis called Williams'," replied Bumpett, sitting down again, "but I do pay for it. I may make free with you in what I'm saying, for I'm helping to keep you from the law, and it's right you should help to keep me. Give me the oath you'll swallow down what I'm telling you and never let it up again."

"What can I do to you, even if I want to?" asked Rhys bitterly.

"Swear, I tell ye."



"I swear it, so help me God," repeated Rhys, his curiosity roused.

"Though I began drivin' o' pigs, I'm the biggest butcher in trade at Abergavenny, am I not?" cried the old man, putting his hand on Rhys' knee and giving it a shake. "Well, I sell more mutton than I ever buy. Do ye understand that? Do ye see what you're lyin' on?" He pointed to the sheepskins. "George is my man and he finds it for me—him an' others I needn't speak of. We've taken toll of you before this."

And, as he chuckled, his eyes disappeared again.

Walters tried to sit up, but grew giddy at once and dropped back on his pillow. He drew a long breath and lay still. The last words made him hate the Pig-driver, but as, at present, he owed him everything, he reflected that hatred would be of little use to him.

"How do you get it all up to Abergavenny?" he inquired at last.

"Ah, you may well ask. And 'tis best you should know, for I'll be glad to get a hand from you when you're up again. Do ye know the Pedlar's Stone? There's not one o' they zany's along here will go a-nigh it."

Rhys knew the place well. On the way to the mountain, about a mile further up, a little rough, stone cross stuck out of the bank, its rude arms overhanging the hedge. It marked the spot where a pedlar had been murdered some hundred years back, and none of the working people would pass it after dark, for even in the daytime it was regarded with suspicion.

"The sheep comes here first, George he knows how. Do ye see them hooks in the ceiling? Did ye take note of the trap ye come down here by? No, I warrant ye didn't, ye was that mazed when ye come. It's all cut up here, an' after that it goes up jint by jint to the place I'm telling you. Williams, he can get two sheep up between ten o'clock and one i' the morning. If ye go along the hedge behind the stone, there's a big bit o' rock close by with a hole scraped in underneath it. It's deep down among the nettles, so ye wouldn't see it if ye



didn't know. That's where they lie till I come round afore daylight wi' the cart on my way to Crishowell. Crishowell folks thinks I'm at Abergavenny, and Abergavenny folks thinks I'm at Crishowell."

Though in his heart Rhys hated the Pig-driver for what he had been doing to him and others like him, he could not help admiring his astuteness ; but he made no comment, for admiration came from him grudgingly as a rule where men were concerned.

"Now," said the old man, "I'll say good-day to ye, Mr. Walters, I must be gettin' on."

He clambered up the ladder, leaving Rhys alone.



## CHAPTER IX

### TWO MEETINGS

GEORGE and the Pig-driver left the cottage together a few minutes afterwards. Both men had business in Crishowell, and as Rhys Walters was now well enough to be left alone for a few hours, Williams had no scruple in turning the key on his charge and starting with his patron for the valley.

The hoar-frost hung on everything. Around them, the heavy air enwrapped the landscape, making an opaque background to the branches and twigs which stood as though cut out in white coral against grey-painted canvas. Bumpett felt the cold a good deal and pressed forward almost at a trot, looking all the more grotesque for the company of the big, quiet man beside him. Some way out of the village they parted, being unwilling to be seen much together.

When he went to see George, Bumpett generally got out of his cart as soon as he had crossed the mountain pass, sending it round by a good road which circled out towards Llangarth, and telling his boy to bring it by that route to Crishowell; he thus avoided trying its springs in the steep lanes, and was unobserved himself as he went down by Williams' house to the village. At the carpenter's shop, where it went to await him, he would pass an agreeable half-hour chatting with the local spirits who congregated there of an afternoon.

He was the most completely popular man in the neighbourhood. For this he was much indebted to the habits of his pig-driving days, when he and his unruly flock had travelled the country on foot to the different fairs. Then many a labourer's wife had lightened his journeys by the pleasant offer



of a bite and a sup, and held herself amply rewarded by the odd bits of gossip and complimentary turns of speech by which the wayfarer knew how to make himself welcome. Now that he had become a man of money and standing, this graciousness of demeanour had not left him ; nay, it was rather set off by the flavour of opulence, and gave meaner folk the comfortable assurance of being hob and nob with the great ones of this world. Nevertheless, the name of "The Pig-driver" stuck to him ; as the Pig-driver they had known him first, and the Pig-driver he would remain, were he to be made Mayor of Abergavenny.

Rounding a corner, the old man came upon an elderly, hard-featured woman who stood to rest and lean a basket which she carried against the bank.

"Oh ! Mr. Bumpett," she exclaimed as he approached, "oh ! Mr. Bumpett."

"Come you here, woman," he said in a mysterious voice, taking her by the elbow, "come down to the brookside till I speak a word wi' you."

"Oh ! Mr. Bumpett," she went on, "so ye've heard, have ye?"

"Sh——sh !" cried the Pig-driver, hurrying her along, "keep you quiet, I tell you, till we be away from the lane."

The Digedi brook ran along the hollow near, and at a sheltered place by the brink he stopped. Both he and his companion were out of breath. The woman sat down upon a rock, her hard face working.

"Indeed, I be miserable upon the face of the earth," she cried, "an I can't think o' nothing but Master Rhys from the time I get out o' my bed until the time I do get in again, and long after that too. An' there's Mrs. Walters a-settin' same as if he were there and sayin' to me, 'Never speak his name, Nannie, I have no son. Dead he have been to the Lord these many years, and now, dead he is to me. His brother's blood crieth to him from the ground.' I can't abide they prayers o' hers."



"Will ye listen to me?" said Bumpett sharply. He gave as much notice to her lamentations as he did to the babble of the brook.

"Ah, she's a hard one, for all her psalms and praises! Never a tear do I see on her face, and there's me be like to break my heart when I so much as go nigh the tollet in the yard and see the young turkey-cock going by. Law! I do think o' the smacks poor Master Rhys did fetch his grandfather, when he were a little bit of a boy, an' how the old bird would run before him, same as if the black man o' Hell was after him!"

She covered her face with her shawl. The Pig-driver was exasperated.

"Will ye hold yer tongue?" he said, thumping his stick on the ground, "or I won't tell ye one blazin' word of what I was to say. Here am I strivin' to tell ye what ye don't know about Mister Walters, an' I can't get my mind out along o' you, ye old fool! Do ye hear me, Nannie Davis?"

At the sound of Rhys' name she looked up.

"If I tell ye something about him, will you give over?" asked the Pig-driver, shaking her by the shoulder.

"Yes, surely, Mr. Bumpett," said Nannie, "I will. I be but a fool, an' that I do know."

"He's safe," said Bumpett. "Do ye hear? He's safe. An' I know where he is."

"And where is he?"

"Ah! that's telling. Don't you ask, my woman, an' it'll be the better for him."

Nannie had quite regained her composure, and an unspeakable load rolled off her mind at her companion's words. Ever since the morning when the mare had been found riderless, sniffing at the door of her box at Masterhouse, and the news of the toll-keeper's death and Rhys' flight had reached the mountain, waking and sleeping she had pictured his arrest.

"So long as he bides quiet where he is, there's none can get a sight o' him," said the old man, "and when we do see our



way to get him off an' over the water—to Ameriky, maybe—I and them I knows will do our best. But he's been knocked about cruel, for, mind ye, they was fightin' very wicked an' nasty, down by the toll."

"Is he bad?" asked Nannie anxiously.

"He was," replied Bumpett, "but he's mending."

"And be I never to know where he be?"

"You mind what I tell ye. But, if ye want to do the man a good turn, ye may. Do ye know the Pedlar's Stone?"

Nannie shuddered. "There's every one knows that. But I durstn't go nigh it, not I. Indeed, 'tis no good place! Saunders of Llan-y-bulch was sayin' only last week——"

The Pig-driver cast a look of measureless scorn upon her.

"Well, ye needn't go nigh it," he interrupted. "Ye can bide twenty yards on the other side."

"Lawk! I wouldn't go where I could see it!"

"Ye must just turn your back, then," said Bumpett crossly.

"But what be I to do?" inquired Nannie, who stood in considerable awe of the Pig-driver.

"Ye might get a few of his clothes an' such like, or anything ye fancy would come handy to him. Bring them down to the stone when it's dark, an' I, or a man I'll send, will be there to get them from ye. Day after to-morrow 'll do."

"I won't be so skeered if there's some I do know to be by," said she reflectively.

"Can ye get they things without Mrs. Walters seein' ye?" inquired he. "It would never do for her to be stickin' her holy nose into it."

Nannie laughed out. Her laugh was remarkable; it had a ring of ribaldry unsuited to her plain bonnet and knitted shawl.

"No fear o' that. Mrs. Walters says to me, no more nor this mornin', 'Take you the keys, Nannie,' she says, 'an' put away all them clothes o' his. Let me forget I bore a child that's to be a disgrace to my old age.' 'Tis an ill wind that



blows nobody good, ye see. But I must be gettin' home now, Mr. Bumpett."

So they parted.

As George entered Crishowell by another way, and got over the last stile dividing the fields from the village, the church bell began to sound. The first stroke was finishing its vibration as he laid his hand on the top rail, but he had gone a full furlong before he heard the next. They were evidently tolling. A woman came out of her door and listened to the bell.

"Who's to be buried?" inquired Williams, as he passed.

"'Tis Vaughan the gate-keeper," she answered, "him as was killed Tuesday."

The young man proceeded until the road turned and brought him right in front of the lych-gate of the church; it was open, and the Vicar of Crishowell stood bareheaded among the graves. He went on by a path skirting the wall, and slipped into the churchyard by another entrance. A large yew-tree stood close to it, and under this he took up his stand unperceived; the bell kept on sounding.

Crishowell church was a plain building, which possessed no characteristic but that of solidity; bits had fallen out of it, and been rebuilt at various epochs of its history, without creating much incongruity or adding much glory to its appearance. The nave roof had settled a little, and the walls were irregular in places, but over the whole sat that somnolent dignity which clings to ancient stone. The chancel windows were Norman, and very small; indeed, so near the ground were they, that boys, sitting in the chancel pews, had often been provoked to unseemly jests during service by the sight of unchurch-going school-mates crowding to make grimaces at them from outside. The porch was high, and surmounted by the belfry, and some old wooden benches ran round its walls to accommodate the ringers. As the sexton, who performed many other functions besides those of his office, had just returned from the fields, Howlie Seaborne, his son, had taken his place and was tolling till his father should have changed his coat. He looked like



a gnome as he stood in the shadow of the porch with the rope in his hand. The sound of many feet was heard coming up the lane, and Williams took off his hat.

The procession came in sight, black in front of the white hedges and trees, moving slowly towards the lych-gate. First went the coffin, carried under its dark pall, and heading a line of figures which trailed behind it like some interminable insect. From miles round people had come; Squire Fenton and Harry from Waterchurch, the yeomanry officer who had been present at the riot, men from Llangarth, gentlemen from distant parts of the country, all anxious to pay the only respect they could to the undaunted old man whose duty had really meant something to him. Immediately behind the dead walked a girl muffled up in a black cloak. They were at the lych-gate. The bell stopped.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live."

The words reached Williams where he stood under the yew-tree, and something swelled up in his heart; abstract things struck him all at once as real. Life was real—death very real—to die fighting like Vaughan had died was real—certainly more real than stealing sheep. He stood thinking, hardly definitely, but in that semi-consciousness of thought which comes at times to most people, and from which they awake knowing a little more than they knew before. Whether they make their knowledge of use to them is another matter.

The Burial Service ran on to the end, and the people dispersed in twos and threes. Some gentlemen, whose horses were waiting at the smith's shop close by, mounted and rode away after a few civil words with the Vicar; the labourers and their wives vanished quickly, the former hurrying off to their interrupted work, and the latter clustering and whispering among themselves. Soon the churchyard was empty, and nothing was left to show what had taken place but the gaping grave and the planks lying round it.

George remained a few minutes at his post under the tree



before emerging and going out by the same gate as the mourners, but, when he did so, he saw that the girl had returned again and was sitting by the mound of upturned earth. His impulse was to go back, respecting her solitude, but Mary had heard his step and looked round at him. Their eyes met. He had never seen the toll-keeper's daughter before, and her beauty and the despair written on her face touched him deeply in the stirred-up state of his mind. Remembering that he must shortly go back to Rhys, the man by whose fault he believed her to be sitting where she was, and share his roof with him for days to come, his soul recoiled. And yet, the truth was worse than he knew.



## CHAPTER X

### FORGET-ME-NOTS

HEREFORD town is one of those slumbrous cities, guiltless of any bait with which to lure the sight-seer, but possessing both a cathedral and an individuality of its own. It is a town which seems to have acquired no suburbs, to have grown up in its proper area out of the flat fields which lie around. But on the night of which I am speaking an unwonted stir was going on, a rumbling of vehicles through streets usually silent, and a great noise of voices and hoofs in the different inn yards. The Green Dragon, that stronghold of county respectability, was crowded from garret to basement, as the lights in every window proclaimed. Inside, chambermaids ran up and down-stairs, men-servants shouted orders from landings, and prim ladies-maids went in and out of bedrooms with the guarded demeanour of those who know, but may not reveal, the mysteries which these contain. The eyes of citizens were constantly gratified by the sight of chariots driven by massive coachmen whose weight seemed likely to break down their vehicles in front if unbalanced by rumbles behind. Into these last the smaller youth of the town deemed it a pride and a pleasure to ascend, when they could do so unnoticed, and to taste all the joys of so exalted a state until the vulgar "Whip behind" of some envious friend made the position untenable.

The cause of this uncommon activity in both town and urchins was that the officers of the Hereford Yeomanry were giving a ball, and from the remotest parts of the county people were flocking to it. The landlords thought well of such



events, for innkeeping, like hop-growing, is a trade in which the speculator may compensate himself by one good harvest for several lean years.

From the assembly rooms a flood of light streamed over the pavement, and across it moved the uniformed figures of the hosts, resplendent in blue and silver, and congregating near the door—some to watch with solemn looks for consignments of their own relations, some, with lighter aspect, for those of other people.

The ball had not actually begun, but in Herefordshire, where such festivities were few, people liked to get as much of them as possible, and carriages were already arriving to disgorge be-feathered old ladies and be-wreathed young ones at the foot of the red-carpeted steps. The band began to tune up, and a general feeling of expectation pervaded the building. Harry Fenton was talking to his brother Llewellyn, who had been dining with him, and who was, with apparent difficulty, drawing on a pair of white kid gloves. More carriages rolled up, the doorway was getting crowded, the band-master raised his *bâton*; then the band slid into a mazurka—much in vogue at the time—and the colonel offered his arm to the county member's wife. The floor filled rapidly.

Llewellyn Fenton was Harry's youngest brother and the dearest friend he had in the world. Though he was only twenty-one, and consequently four years Harry's junior, there had never been much real difference between the two, the elder being younger than his age, and the younger considerably older. Since their early boyhood they had held together, Harry clinging rather to the harder nature of Llewellyn, and now that they had grown up and gone their different ways, they took every chance of meeting they could get. The Squire on the other side of the ball-room caught sight of them standing together, and smiled as he saw them exchange nods and go off to their respective partners; he liked all his four boys, but Harry and Llewellyn were the pair which appealed to him most.



The evening went on cheerfully, and dance succeeded dance. The brothers had run up against each other again, and were watching a quadrille from the door of the supper-room.

"Llewellyn," said Harry, taking hold of his arm, "who is that girl? There, look. Dancing with Tom Bradford."

"I don't know," said his brother. "Let go, Harry."

"Good heavens! isn't she pretty?" he went on, unheeding, and gripping Llewellyn.

"Well, yes," said the other, disengaging himself. "She is, there's no denying that."

"Do you want to deny it?" asked Harry, with a contemptuous snort.

"N—no, I don't."

The girl in question was dancing in a set immediately in front of them. She was a little over the middle height, though in these modern days of tall women she would probably pass unnoticed on that score. She seemed quite young, barely out of her teens, but her self-possession was as complete as that quality can be when it is mixed with self-consciousness—not the highest sort of self-possession, but always something. One could not blame her for being alive to her own good looks, they were so intensely obvious, and her complexion, which struck one at once, was of that rose-and-white sort which reminds the spectator of fruit—soft, and with a bloom on it like the down of a butterfly's wing.

Seeing only the face one would guess it to be accompanied by rich golden hair, but this girl's was of that shade which can only be described as mouse-coloured, and it grew light and fluffy, rather low on her forehead, its curious contrast with the warm complexion putting her quite out of the common run of red-cheeked, yellow-locked county beauties. Her neck was long and slim, and she carried herself perfectly when moving, though there was a lack of repose about her whole personality when she stood still. She was dressed charmingly in some shiny, silky stuff with a pattern of blue forget-me-nots running



over it. On the front of her bodice she wore a small artificial bunch of these flowers, and a wreath of the same in her hair.

Many people besides Harry were looking at her, and she was evidently entirely aware of the fact.

For the rest of that dance he kept the eye of a lynx upon the unconscious Tom Bradford, and when that youth had finally resigned his partner to the chaperonage of a pleasant-looking spinster, he was off like an arrow after him. Llewellyn looked on rather grimly; he had some experience of his brother's flames.

The more precise customs of those days required that young men should first be introduced to the chaperons of their would-be partners, and Harry found himself bowing before the lady whom Tom Bradford named as Miss Ridgeway. She in turn presented him to the girl beside her, who was fluttering her fan and smiling.

"My niece, Miss Isoline Ridgeway," she said, throwing an approving look on the open-faced young fellow.

By some miracle it appeared that Miss Isoline was not engaged for the next dance, and as a portly Minor Canon appeared at this juncture and led away her aunt to the refreshment table, the two were left together. Harry's heart beat; now that he was safely introduced to the object of his admiration he could not think what to say to her. Besides, he was afraid that Llewellyn was looking.

"I was—I mean—I have been trying to get introduced to you for ever so long," he stammered out at last, quite forgetting that he had only caught sight of her about ten minutes before.

"Then I hope you are grateful to Mr. Bradford," she replied.

"Yes, I am," said Harry. "Tom is a very good fellow," he added, more because the sound of his own voice was encouraging than for any other reason.

Isoline glanced over her shoulder towards her late partner,



as if she would say that she did not think much of Mr. Bradford.

"He cannot dance," she remarked.

"I hope you will find me no worse," said loyal Harry.

"Oh no," she replied, with a little laugh, "I am sure I shall not."

"It is strange that I have never seen you before," he said, "for you live in Hereford, don't you? I have often heard your aunt's name."

"I lost my parents some time ago, and I have lately come to live with her. I am only just out of mourning." And she looked down at her forget-me-not sprinkled dress.

He did not quite know what to say, but, as the next dance was beginning, he offered her his arm with a little bow.

Isoline Ridgeway danced divinely, and Harry felt as though he were flying into the seventh heaven—wherever that problematical spot may be—flying and sailing with the mouse-coloured head near his shoulder. The valse had been so lately introduced into England that, in the country, people were only beginning to take it up, and very few could dance it well, so these two, with their perfect accord and grace of motion, were remarked by many.

"Who is that pretty girl dancing with my boy?" asked Harry's father of a neighbour. "They seem to be enjoying themselves."

The old gentleman addressed adjusted his spectacles.

"That is Miss Ridgeway's niece," he replied.

"But, my dear sir, that conveys nothing to me," said the Squire.

"Old Ridgeway was a solicitor in some Midland town, I believe, and a slippery scoundrel too. He settled here some time ago, but he has been dead twenty years or more. His daughter, Miss Ridgeway, lives in the same house still, and her sister was married to the present Vicar of Crishowell, near Llangarth. That is all I can tell you about them."



"Indeed," said the Squire, "I did not know that, though I know Lewis of Crishowell very well."

"She is a good creature, Miss Ridgeway, and does a great deal among the poor. The niece seems more likely to do a great deal among the rich, if one may judge by her looks. They are not quite the sort of people one would have met here when I was young."

"You are right—quite right," said Mr. Fenton. And the two old gentlemen sighed over the falling away of their times as their fathers and grandfathers had done before them.

Meantime the valse had come to an end, and Isoline and Harry went towards the coolness of the entrance. "Sitting out," for more than a very few minutes, was not countenanced then as it is now, and they stood together in the passage looking into the empty street.

"I shall be very sorry when to-night is over," said he presently.

"So shall I," she replied demurely. "I enjoy balls more than anything in the world. I wonder when I shall go to another."

"Surely you will go to the Hunt Ball? It will be in less than a week."

"No, I am going away," said she, watching his face for the effect of her words, and not disclosing the fact that neither she nor her aunt had been invited.

"Going away!" echoed he, in dismay. "But where? Forgive me, but I thought you said you had only just come to Hereford."

"I am going to stay with my uncle at Crishowell Vicarage while my aunt goes away for some months; she has been ill, and the doctor ordered it."

"Oh, at Crishowell," he said, much relieved. "That is not very far; I—I go to Crishowell sometimes. I did not know that Mr. Lewis was your uncle."



"He married my aunt's sister," said Isoline, "but she is dead. It will be very dull there."

"If I have to go to Crishowell on any business—or anything, do you think he will allow me to pay my respects to you—and to him, of course?"

"He might," she answered, looking under her eyelashes. "At any rate, I will ask him."

"Thank you, thank you," said Harry fervently.

Isoline was delighted. The prospect of five or six months in the unvaried society of her uncle had not been inspiring; she only remembered him as an unnecessarily elderly person who had once heard her catechism in her youth and been dissatisfied with the recital. It was hardly to be supposed that a young girl, full of spirits and eager for life, could look forward to it, especially one who had grown up in the atmosphere of small towns and knew nothing of country pleasures. But the horizon brightened.

"I think I must go back to my aunt now," she said, with a little prim air which became her charmingly.

"But you will give me one more dance?" pleaded Harry. "What a fool I was to find you so late."

"I have only one more to give," she replied, "and that is the very last of all."

"Keep it for me, pray, and promise you will stay till the end. I can look after you and Miss Ridgeway, and put you into your carriage when it is over."

"Oh, yes, I will stay, if my aunt does not mind," said Isoline, as they went back to the ballroom.

The elder Miss Ridgeway was an eminently good-natured person, and the refreshment administered by the Minor Canon had been sustaining, so she professed herself ready to remain till the end of the ball, and Harry, with deep gratitude, betook himself to his other partners till the blissful moment should arrive when he might claim Isoline again. He saw nothing more of Llewellyn, who had his own affairs and amusements on hand, and, for once in his life, he was very glad. It is to



be feared that the girls with whom he danced found him dull company, as most of the time he was turning over in his mind what possible pretext he could invent for an early visit to Crishowell.

The last dance was Sir Roger de Coverley; a great many people had resolved to see the entertainment out, and, as Harry stood opposite Isoline in the ranks, he marked with pleasure that it promised to be a long affair. He had just come from an interview with the bandmaster, whom he had thoughtfully taken apart and supplied with a bottle of champagne, and the purposeful manner in which the little round man was taking his place among the musicians was reassuring.

Sir Roger is without doubt the most light-hearted and popular of country dances, nevertheless it is one in which a man is like to see a great deal more of every one else's partner than of his own. Harry's time was taken up by bowings, scrapings, and crossings of hands with the most homely daughter of the Minor Canon, while Isoline went through the same evolutions with a sprightly gentleman, whose age in no way hampered the intricate steps with which he ornamented the occasion. It was unsatisfactory—highly so—like many things ardently longed for and little enjoyed, and when the music stopped for an instant before merging itself into "God save the Queen," and people were bidding each other good-night in groups, the young man ruefully led her back to her aunt, who was making for the place in which she had left her cloak. He waited for the two women to come out of the cloak-room, and then plunged into the street to find the modest fly which had conveyed his goddess to the ball. The air was bitter, for the winter sunrise was as yet far off. Coachmen were urging their horses up to the door, and footmen touching their hats to their respective masters and mistresses above them on the steps to signify that their carriages were waiting in the little string that had formed itself in the road. The fly was wedged in between an omnibus belonging to one of the town hotels and a large barouche, so there was a few minutes' delay, in which



Harry found time to remind Isoline of her promise about her uncle. Then he handed Miss Ridgeway respectfully in, held her niece's fingers in his own for one moment, and the clumsy vehicle rolled away with a great clatter, leaving him standing upon the pavement. As he turned to go up the steps he noticed something lying at his feet, and, stooping, picked up an artificial forget-me-not.



## CHAPTER XI

### THE BRECON COACH

THE Green Dragon stood in High Street within sound of the Cathedral bells, and was the point of migration to the worldly part of the county, just as the Cathedral was the point of migration to the spiritual. The Hereford and Brecon coach started from its door, and one morning, a few days after the ball, a little crowd had collected as usual to see it off. It was nine o'clock, and the day had not sent out what little heat it possessed; the ostlers were shivering as they stood at the horses' heads, and the guard blew on his fingers whenever he had the courage to take them from his pockets. The coachman, great man, had not as yet left the landlord's room, in which he was spending his last minutes before starting, talking to the landlady by the fire, and occasionally casting an eye through the glass door which opened upon the main entrance where the passengers were assembling.

"Guard, guard," cried an old lady, standing near a page who led a Blenheim spaniel, "will you kindly look among the boxes and see whether a small dog's water-tin is there? It is marked 'Fido,' and has 'Miss Crouch, Belle Vue Villas, Laurel Grove, Gloucester,' printed upon the bottom."

"It's all right, 'm," replied the guard immovably, "I saw to it myself." The luggage had been put upon the coach a couple of hours earlier before the horses were harnessed, and he and the ostlers exchanged winks.

The page-boy sidled up to his mistress. "I've got it 'ere, mum—under my arm, mum," he said, holding out the article.



The passengers smiled with meaning, and Isoline Ridgeway, who was among them, giggled audibly.

"If your memory for the mail-bags is not better than your memory for the luggage," remarked Fido's owner, "there are many who will have to wait for their letters, my man."

The passengers smiled again, but this time not at the old lady.

Miss Ridgeway the elder had left the comfort of her snug Georgian house at this unusually early hour to see her niece off by the Brecon coach, which was to put her down at the toll-gate lately demolished by Rebecca, near the foot of Crishowell Lane, at which place her uncle was to meet her.

Isoline wore a fur-trimmed pelisse, and her head was enveloped in a thick veil, which her aunt had insisted upon her wearing, both as a protection against the east wind and any undesirable notice which her face might attract. The two ladies stood in the shelter of the Green Dragon doorway while the coachman, who had torn himself from the fire, was gathering up the reins, and the passengers were taking their seats. Miss Crouch, with Fido on her lap, was installed inside, and the guard was holding the steps for Isoline to mount, when Harry Fenton came rushing up wrapped in a long travelling-coat.

"Just in time!" he called out to the guard; "my luggage is on, I hope?"

He turned to Isoline's aunt, hat in hand.

"As I am going down to Waterchurch to-day," he said, "I hope you will allow me to look after Miss Ridgeway's comfort and be of any use I can to her on the way."

"Thank you, Mr. Fenton," she replied, "I am pleased to think my niece has the escort of some gentleman whom I know. It will relieve my mind greatly."

Isoline said nothing, but she smiled brilliantly behind her veil; then kissing her aunt, she got into her place, followed by Harry; the coachman raised his chin at the ostlers, who whipped the rugs from the horses, and they were off.



Is there anything in this steam-driven world, except perhaps trotting to covert on a fresh February morning, which gives a more expectant fillip to the spirits and a finer sense of exhilaration than starting on a journey behind four good horses? The height at which one sits, the rush of the air on one's face, the ring of the sixteen hoofs in front, the rocking-horse canter of the off-leader ere he makes up his lordly mind to put his heart into the job and settle to a steady trot, the purr of the wheels on the road, the smell of the moist country as the houses are left behind, and the brisk pace now that the first half-mile has been done and the team is working well together—surely the man whose blood does not rise at all these, must have the heart of a mollusc and the imagination of a barn-door fowl.

Harry had travelled so often behind the blue roan and three bays that he knew their paces, history, and temper nearly as well as the man who drove them, and for some time his interest in them was so great as to make him almost unconscious of Isoline's presence. As they bowled along she sighed softly, drawing up her rug round her. If it had not been for the society in which she found herself, she would willingly have changed places with Miss Crouch inside. The country conveyed nothing to her eye; it was cold, Harry's want of appreciation was anything but flattering—and she was accustomed to think a good deal about what was flattering and what was not; it was rather a favourite word of hers. She had never looked at the horses, because it had not occurred to her to do so; in her mind they were merely four animals whose efforts were necessary to the coach's progress. How could one wonder at her want of interest in ideas and things of which she had no knowledge? To her town-bred soul, outdoor life was a dull panorama seen at intervals through a plate-glass window. Nevertheless, had it been otherwise, she would not have changed her point of view much, being one of those women whose spirits rise at no exercise, whose blood is stirred by no encounter; you might have run the Derby under her



nose without taking her mind from her next neighbour's bonnet.

Presently Harry looked round and saw her arranging the rug that had fallen again.

"I beg your pardon," he cried, "what an oaf you must think me, Miss Ridgeway! I promised to take care of you, and I don't even see that you are comfortable."

"It does not matter at all," she said pleasantly, but with a little shudder in case he should take her words too literally.

"But you are cold, I am sure you are," exclaimed he, beginning to pull off his heavy coat. "You must have this, it will go right over your dress—cloak—I don't know what it is called."

"No, no," she protested. "Please, pray, Mr. Fenton, do not be so absurd. Look, I am all right. The rug only slipped off my knees."

He tucked it elaborately round her and sat down, resolving to devote himself to her and to nothing else; and, as it was with a view to this purpose that he had timed his journey home, no doubt he was right.

"Where do you expect to meet Mr. Lewis?" he inquired. "I suppose at Llangarth?"

"I am to leave the coach at some toll-gate, I do not quite know where, but the guard understands, I believe, and my uncle will be there. I think it is only just being put up, for the Rebecca-ites destroyed it."

"I have some reason to know that place," observed Harry, with a sigh; "I would give a thousand pounds—if I had it—to catch the man who was at the bottom of that night's work. I tried hard, but I failed."

"How interesting; do tell me all about it," said she. "You were there with the military, were you not?"

"The yeomanry, yes. But we did little good."

"Were you in your regimentals? How I should like to have been there to see the yeomanry!"

"You would not have liked to see poor Vaughan, the toll-



man, killed, though he was a fine sight standing up against the rioters."

"But why did he come out if there were so many against him? Surely he would not have been killed if he had stayed inside until help came?"

"He was responsible for the gate," said Harry.

"And he would have been blamed, I suppose," said Isoline. "How unjust!"

"No, he wouldn't have been blamed," said Fenton. He was too young to reflect that people might belong to the same nation and yet speak different languages.

"Poor old man, how very sad," said the girl. "Which of those dreadful rioters killed him?"

"A man called Walters—Rhys Walters—a very large farmer."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Isoline; "then will he be hanged?"

"He will have to stand his trial for manslaughter—that is, when they catch him, if they ever do, for he is a wonderful fellow. I thought at one time I might have taken him myself, but he slipped through my fingers, I can't imagine how to this day."

"And were you near when he killed the toll-keeper?"

"I was, but I did not actually see it done. One of our men and two constables swore at the inquest that they saw Walter's arm fly up and the man go down. It was so dark and everything was so mixed up that one could hardly tell what was happening, but an inn-keeper named Evans was close by, and he saw the blow struck. He was one of the men caught, and he confessed everything."

She was really interested, and was listening with her lips parted.

"When I saw Walters making off I followed hard. I made up my mind I would get hold of him if I could, but he was on a good mare, and he took me over the worst places he could find; I very nearly came to grief among the boulders at a



brook, the light was bad and they were so slippery, but I got through somehow, and I heard him in Crishowell Lane not far ahead. When he got to the top of it, he made for the Black Mountain as hard as he could, and I kept within sound of his hoofs till we were about a quarter of a mile from his own farm; then I heard him pull up into a walk. When I rode up I saw that the horse was riderless, so I suppose he must have slipped off somewhere along the foot of the mountain and left me to follow it. That was the second time he had made a fool of me."

"Did you know him before?"

"I met him not far from that very place, as I was coming down to Waterchurch from London the day after Christmas. I rode from Hereford on, and lost my way in the fog by the mountain. He was groping about too, and he pretended to go out of his road to show me mine—devil that he is—but I know why he did it now."

"Why?"

"He rode with me so as to talk about the riot, for every one knew that there would be one; so he put me on the wrong scent; he seemed to have some secret information about it, and it tallied with other rumours we had heard, so the police and the yeomanry were kept night after night at the gate by the river at Llangarth. If it had not been for a boy who saw the rioters making for the toll by Crishowell Lane, and who ran all the way to the town with the information, they would have got off scot-free. What would I not give to catch that man!"

"I am afraid you are very vindictive, Mr. Fenton."

"They are scouring the country steadily," continued he, unheeding, "but they can find no trace of him. It is extraordinary."

But Isoline had grown tired of the subject now that the sensational part of it was over, and she directed her companion's attention to some passing object.

The sun had come out, and she was beginning to enjoy



herself; it was pleasant to be seen abroad too with such a smart-looking young fellow in attendance.

They chatted and laughed as the hedges flew by, and when the first stage was done and they pulled up before the creaking signboard of a village inn to change horses, both regretted that a part of their journey was over. Harry was too much engrossed to get down and watch the new team being put in—a matter which the coachman, who knew him well, did not fail to notice, and he and the guard exchanged comments.

"Hi, there!" cried a voice from the road, "have you got a place left for one?" A sturdy young man in leather leggings was coming round a corner, waving his stick.

Harry started up.

"Gad, Llewellyn, is that you?" he cried, looking down on the crown of his brother's head.

"It is," replied Llewellyn, putting his foot on the axle and swinging himself up. "Is there a vacant place anywhere, Harry?"

"Yes, a man has just left the one behind me. Miss Ridgeway, this is my brother, Mr. Llewellyn Fenton. Miss Ridgeway is travelling to Crishowell, and I am—I mean, I have—I was asked by her aunt to look after her."

"Mornin', sir," said the guard, coming out of the inn and touching his hat. "Any luggage? Two vacant places, sir."

"No, nothing; only myself."

"I didn't expect to see you, Loo. What have you been doing here?" asked Harry.

"Looking after pigs," said Llewellyn, as he sat down.

Isoline opened her eyes; she thought that only people who wheeled barrows with pitchforks stuck in them did that.

"He is my father's agent," explained Harry.

Llewellyn was rather amused. Harry had not told him that he was going down to Waterchurch that day, so the meeting of the brothers was purely accidental. It did not escape him that



two was company and three was none, for he marked Isoline's little air of complacency at her entire absorption of her cavalier, and his having broken in upon her raised a faint but pleasant malice in him. It could not exactly be said that he disliked her, for he did not know her in the least, though he had observed her a good deal at the ball, and, considering that he had seen very little of the world, he was a youth wonderfully free from prejudice. But, had he put his feelings into thoughts, he would have known that he was irritated. Isoline glanced at him once or twice, and made up her mind that she hated him.

"Were you buying pigs then?" asked Harry, as they were trotting along the high-road again.

"Father wants a few young Berkshires, and I came to see some belonging to a man out here. It sounds low, does it not, Miss Ridgeway?" said his brother, looking at Isoline, and knowing by instinct that the subject was uncongenial.

"Oh, no, not at all, I assure you," replied she, quite uncertain how she ought to take his remark. That pigs were vulgar was well known, nevertheless she could not help a vague suspicion that she was being laughed at. But Llewellyn's face was inscrutable, and she could only move uneasily on her seat and wish him miles away.

For the rest of the journey the two young men looked after her carefully, Llewellyn vying with his brother in his attention to her every wish; but a snake had entered into her Eden, a snake who was so simple that she could not understand him, but who was apparently not simple enough to misunderstand her.

Sometime later they clattered through Llangarth, stopping at the Bull Inn, where Harry had been kept for so many hours on the night of the riot, and went along the Brecon road parallel with the river. The toll-gate by Crishowell had not yet been re-erected, and the bare posts stuck dismally up at the wayside by the little slate-roofed house. As it came in



sight they observed a vehicle drawn up beside the hedge, and evidently awaiting the advent of the coach.

"That must be my uncle's carriage," said Isoline, beginning to collect her wraps.

They stopped at the toll, and the guard prepared to disentangle Miss Ridgeway's possessions from the other luggage. Harry and Llewellyn jumped down, and the former went towards the strange-looking conveyance which was moored up under the lee of the hedge. He peered into the weather-beaten hood which crowned it, expecting to find the Vicar of Crishowell inside, but its only occupant was a huddled-up figure fast asleep. He shook it smartly.

Howlie Seaborne opened his eyes without changing his position.

"Wake up, boy!" cried Fenton, leaning over the wheel and plastering himself with a layer of mud by the act; "do you belong to Mr. Lewis?"

"Naw," said Howlie.

"Then has no one come to meet Miss Ridgeway?"

"Here oi be, but oi belong to moiseif an' to no one else. Be her come?"

"Your uncle is not here, but he has sent for you," said Harry, going up to the coach from which Llewellyn was helping Isoline to descend.

Howlie gave the old white mare in front of him a slap with the whip, and arrived in the middle of the road with a great creaking and swaying.

"Oi can't take them boxes along," he remarked, pointing to Miss Ridgeway's luggage which stood in the road.

"Never mind, you can send for them after," said Harry. "Guard, put them in the toll-house if any one is there."

While this was being done, Isoline climbed up beside Howlie, and the young men wished her good-bye.

"You will ask your uncle?" said Harry, looking earnestly into the hood.



"Yes, yes," she said, waving her hand. "Good-bye, good-bye, Mr. Fenton, and thank you for taking such care of me!"

Then the vehicle lumbered into Crishowell Lane with one wheel almost up on the bank.

"Can you drive, boy?" she asked nervously.

"Yaas," replied Howlie; "can you?"



## CHAPTER XII

### GEORGE'S BUSINESS

IT was well into the middle of January, and a few days after Isoline's arrival, before Rhys was sufficiently recovered from his injuries to move about ; luckily for him, no bones had been broken, and George's simple nursing, supplemented by the Pig-driver's advice, had met every need. The slight concussion and the exposure had brought on fever, which left him so helpless and weak that he could not rise from his bed without help, while the strange place he was forced to inhabit held back his progress, for he could get no more fresh air than was admitted by the openings in the wall. When he was able to walk again, George would drag him up the ladder after night had fallen, and he would pace unsteadily about the potato-patch, ready to disappear into the cottage at the faintest sound of an approaching foot. But such a thing was rarely heard near their God-forsaken habitation, and, when it was, it belonged to no other than Bumpett. Had he searched the kingdom, he could not have found a safer place in which to hide his head, than the one chance had brought him to on the night of his flight.

Convalescence, once begun, makes strides in a constitution such as his. Every day added something to his strength, bringing at the same time an impatience of captive life, untold longings for a new horizon ; by the time he was practically a sound man with the full use of his limbs, he was half mad with the monotony of his days. Besides this, Nannie, according to Bumpett's order, had brought most of his everyday possessions to the Pedlar's Stone, and, once in his own clothes, an



intense desire for his past identify came upon him, embittered by the knowledge that his choice lay between an absolute abandonment of it, and prison and disgrace. All his life he had been accustomed to be somebody, and he felt like a man in a dream as he looked round at the sheepskins, the iron hooks, and implements of Williams' illicit trade. Only a few miles divided him from Great Masterhouse; surely he had but to step out of these unworthy surroundings and go back to his own! Everything since his illness seemed unreal, his old self was the true one, this a nightmare, a sham. Nevertheless, between him stood that one night's deed like a sentry and barred the way.

There was not even the remotest prospect of escape, for Bumpett, who made it his business to gather all the news he could about the search, had strongly impressed on him the necessity of lying low. When it should be given up as hopeless and vigilance relaxed, the time would be come, he said, to make for Cardiff, and get out on the high seas by hook or by crook. The knowledge of the fugitive's hiding-place would remain entirely between the Pig-driver and George Williams, for the old man was firm in his refusal to divulge it to Nannie, devoted as she was, saying that what he had seen of women did not incline him to trust them with his secrets. "They be a pore set," he observed, "they've room for naught i' their heads but tongues."

So Rhys and George made up their minds to live together for some time to come, though it was hardly a prospect that gave either much satisfaction. That the one owed a debt of gratitude to the other did not tend to make matters better, for being under an obligation to a person with whom one is not in sympathy, can scarce be called a pleasure, and Rhys was not at all in sympathy with George. Acutely sensitive as to what people thought of him, whether he actually respected their opinion or not, he soon saw that it was from no personal admiration or regard that he had been so carefully tended—as much would have been done for any human creature in distress.



The sheep-stealer too was at all times a taciturn man with deep prejudices and strong loves and hates ; simple and unpretentious to a degree himself, he loathed all pretension in others, and felt it hard to bear the airs of superiority and patronizing ways which were seldom absent from Rhys' manner towards him. Coming from a runaway criminal to whom he was extending shelter they were absurd ; but George did not think of that, for he had as little humour as Rhys, though its want arose from vastly different causes. The lighter aspects of life had passed him by, and he was hampered by the misfit of his double life to his eminently single mind. And whenever he looked at Rhys, the face of the girl in the churchyard rose before him.

It was the direst necessity which had induced George Williams to stray so far across the line of honesty, and bitterly he regretted the step. A couple of years before, he and his mother, a blind old woman, had inhabited a little hovel near Presteign, which belonged to the Pig-driver, for the old man owned many cottages in various parts of the neighbourhood. As she could do nothing towards their livelihood, the whole maintenance of the household fell upon the son, who worked hard at such odd jobs as he could get, and earned a small sum weekly by hedging and ditching. They lived very frugally, and with great management made both ends meet, until, one winter, the widow fell ill and took to her bed ; then came the pinch. At the end of her illness the young man found himself in debt with arrears of rent and no prospect of paying ; besides which, he was receiving messages from Bumpett every week to the effect that, if money were not forthcoming, they would be turned out of doors. Work was slack, and he was in despair ; finally he went off to Abergavenny to interview his landlord, and to get, if possible, a little grace from the close-fisted old man.

It happened that, at that time, Bumpett was beginning to make a regular business of sheep-stealing ; he had started by receiving the stolen goods from men whose private enterprise



had led them to lay hands on the animals, and he ended by taking the responsibility of the trade on himself, and stipulating that the actual thieves should enter his employment and supply no other person. It had paid him well. George's need was his opportunity; he wanted another active, reliable hand, and, knowing most things about most people connected with him, he perceived that this steady and trustworthy young fellow was the man for the place. He told him that he meant to offer him a chance on condition that he pledged his word to secrecy, and, when this had been done, he put before him a choice of two things; either he was to become his workman at a small fixed wage, living rent-free in the cottage which now sheltered Rhys, or he was to turn out of his present quarters the next day with a debt which he could not pay off. If he accepted the first alternative his debt was to be cancelled. This contract was to hold good for three years, during which time he was to serve Bumpett entirely, sworn faithfully to secrecy when the time should have elapsed.

It was a hard struggle with fate for the poor boy, and one in which he came off second-best; he took the Pig-driver's terms with a heavy heart, and entered on his new occupation, going out for several nights with an expert thief, both in the near and more remote parts of the county, to see the way in which things were done. Afterwards he removed with his mother to their new abode, where the poor woman, being blind, dwelt till the day of her death without knowing how her son was occupied. She lived in that end of the cottage which did not communicate with the cellar, and George, who still kept his hedge and ditching work, easily persuaded her that it was to this and to the lower rent of their new home that they owed their comparative prosperity. She had now been dead about ten months, and he was still working out his time with his employer and longing for its end.

"What are you going to do?" asked Rhys one afternoon, as he saw George take a pickaxe and shovel from a corner of the cottage. The outer door was locked, and he had come up



from below to escape the dullness of his underground dwelling for a while.

"Dig a hole in the garden," replied the other, "I be goin' out to-night, and maybe there'll be something to bury afore morning."

"I'll come with you," said Rhys.

"Well, I suppose you may as well begin some time, and, if you're feeling right enough, I've nothing against it. It'll be a change for you."

"I am sick and tired of this place," exclaimed his companion ungraciously, for he was somewhat piqued by the indifferent acceptance of his companion. He had condescended rather in offering his help.

"I'll lock the door on the outside," observed Williams, as he went out, "so you needn't go below again."

Rhys sat down by the hearth and listened to the strokes of the pickaxe among the gooseberry bushes outside. He took out his watch and counted the hours till night should come and he should go for the first time beyond the walls of the weary little garden which had become so hateful to him. Seven hours ; it was an age to wait. But it went by at last.

In the dark of the moonless night the two men went out, taking with them the few implements needful to their work—a piece of rope, a small, very heavy hammer, and a long knife which George attached to a leather belt round his middle. Rhys carried a dark lantern, which for extra safety was muffled in a felt bag, and an old, tattered cloak. As they stepped across the plank into the track up the hillside, the smell of the chill night blew against his nostrils. The air was thick, only faintly penetrated by stars, and bearing with it a chill of approaching rain, but, to the captive, it was a taste of Paradise. He drew a long breath and rubbed his feet against the turf for the pure pleasure of feeling again its firm velvet, and there ran through his being that sense of expansion, mental and physical, which comes to many people in the wide stillness of the night world. Had he been a woman, he would



have wept ; as it was he did not analyze his feelings, but was merely conscious that he had been dead and that he lived again.

As they passed the Pedlar's Stone they halted for a minute while George showed him the rock a few yards off under which the meat could be hidden until Bumpett should come to take it away. Rhys pushed his arm into the hole beneath and felt the lining of hay which was put there periodically for its better preservation. His hand was stung by the nettles growing round and above it.

When they reached the Twmpa's foot they went westward and skirted the base, keeping as close to it as possible, then turned into a creek down which a rush of mountain-water was flowing between rocks.

Rhys understood nothing of his companion's plan and was not inclined to question him, so he kept silence ; though his interest was roused he had sense enough to know that obedience would further their work, and that trusting to Williams would be the best way of saving them both from the chance of discovery. The sheep-stealer stopped where the running water swirled into a pool and out again yet more violently through a narrow place in the rocks, and directed him to set down the lantern.

"We'll come back here when we get our beast," he said. "Listen, do you hear anything?"

Across the noise of the torrent came the faint baa of a sheep.

"There's a flock not far off," said George.

"There used to be a hut up here," said Rhys, stretching out his arm towards the slope above.

"Aye, an' likely there's a man in it too," replied the other. "I can't see no light. Maybe he's sleeping. He'll have to hearken pretty smart if he's to hear we."

They crossed the water and began quietly to descend the hillside. Some way up they could see the dim forms of the sheep, above them again the shepherd's hut, a faint excrescence



on the sky-line. Williams uncoiled the rope he carried and twisted it round his body; in one hand he held the hammer.

"Now," he said to Rhys, "put the cloak over your back an' get on your hands and knees. Keep anigh me, and when you see me throw the sheep, down you wi' the cloak over his head to stop his noise and hold him fast. I'll do the rest."

They crawled forward, one behind the other, stopping for several minutes at a time, flattened against the earth when they saw any animal look in their direction. The sheep were feeding unconsciously, having finished the first long sleep with which the animal world begins the night, and when they were close enough to see their white bodies take definite shape in the dull starlight, Williams chose his victim, a fine large wether on the outskirts of the flock. Rhys pressed close behind him.

They were well within a couple of yards of their game when the animal sniffed suspiciously and would have turned his head towards the danger after the manner of horned creatures. But George's hand had gripped him by the hind-leg and laid him with a turn of the wrist on the hillside before he had fully realized that an enemy was upon him, and he was struggling half suffocated by the heavy cloak which Walters flung round his head. The two strong men held him down with all their might till his efforts had grown less violent and Williams had unwound the rope from his body and tied his legs. Then he took up the hammer and, with all his force, dealt him one tremendous blow between the horns. The sheep quivered and lay still.

"Thank God, that's done," he said, getting up from his knees.

They hoisted their prize on to George's back and went stealthily down the hill to the stream. Here they laid it on a rock, and while Rhys held its head over the water, his companion severed the large artery in the throat. The lantern which they had turned on their work showed the crimson



stain, as it mixed itself with the torrent, to be borne whirling down between the boulders and out of sight.

When the blood had ceased flowing, Williams took a wisp of hay and stopped the wound, binding it round with a strand of rope ; he washed the red marks from his hands and sleeves and from the stones on which they had been kneeling, making Rhys search each foot of ground with the lantern for the least traces of their deed. Then he got the dead beast upon his back again covered by the cloak, and they set their faces towards the cottage.

Since they had started that night, the sheep-stealer had taken rather a different place in his companion's mind. Accustomed to regard him as a clod and no more, the calm skill he displayed in his occupation and his great personal strength impressed Rhys, and, for the first time in their acquaintance, he spoke an appreciative word.

"That was a wonderful fine bit of work," he remarked as they left the mountain behind them, "few could match you at that, Williams !"

"'Tis a cursed business," said George between his teeth. "God's truth ! but I do hate it !"

"Then what makes you do it, man ?" exclaimed Rhys.

"Ah, that's just it. I've sold myself to the devil, that's why."

Rhys laughed. "Where did you meet with him ?" he asked lightly.

"At Abergavenny," replied George gravely. "And his name is James Bumpett."



## CHAPTER XIII

### THE SEVEN SNOW-MEN

MARY'S child opened its eyes prematurely on this world, only to wail itself out of it again in a couple of weeks. It was a miserable, feeble little creature, but the mother clung to it, though it was the son of her father's murderer, of the lover whose baseness towards herself seemed to her nothing compared with his baseness in lifting his hand against the grey head now lying by the wall in Crishowell churchyard. This she told herself again and again as she lay tossing in the weary days succeeding its birth. Though her love for the father was dead, struck down by that foul blow, she had still some to give the child ; it was hers, she felt, hers alone. He had never seen it, never would see it, and never would his face shadow its little life.

During her illness the Vicar had been to visit her, and had tried, very gently, to bring home to her the greatness of her fault. She listened to his words meekly and with respect, but he left the house feeling that he had not made much impression. When he was gone she thought over all he had said ; to have explained to him what was in her heart would have been impossible, for she could hardly explain it to herself, but she knew that, though she recoiled from the man who had once been everything to her, she could not go back upon the love. It was a gift she had made fully, freely, rejoicing in the giving, and she would not repent it. If the sun had gone down on her and left her to grope through the black night, she would accept it as the price of her short happiness ; she felt this



instinctively, dumbly. She was proud, and, knowing that all the world would think itself at liberty to cast stones at her, she was not going to invite it to do so, much less to shrink from its uplifted hand. The thing was her affair, her loss, and no one else's. Life would be hard, but she would meet it for the child's sake; she would make him an honest man, and, perchance, if she did her duty by him, he might one day stand between her and the loneliness of existence. That was what one might call the middle stratum of her soul; down below—far, far down—there was a tideless sea of grief. Then the poor little infant died.

In a small place like Crishowell it is scant news that can remain hidden; what is known to one is the property of the whole community, and Mary's history was soon in every mouth. Horror and mystery were sweet to the rural taste, which was beginning to feel dulled after such a surfeit of events as the riot, the arrests, Vaughan's death, and Rhys' disappearance. The tale of her double wrong gave it something to think about again, and the talk reached the ears of George Williams at last, though he mixed rarely with his fellow-men, and consequently knew little of the topics of the village.

He had thought a great deal about the toll-keeper's daughter since the day he had found her sitting in the churchyard, for, in that moment, he seemed to have looked into her very heart. He knew now that he had only seen half of it. He was anything but a vindictive man, but as he walked out of the village one evening with his newly-gotten knowledge, if he could have done what he liked, he would have gone straight home and killed Rhys Walters, then and there, with his two hands. Seeing the story laid out before his mind's eye, he wondered how he should manage to exist under the same roof with him. His view was not altogether a just one, for he could hardly have felt more strongly had Walters deliberately murdered the father in order to ruin the daughter unopposed, but he did not stop to think of that. He saw things in the rough, and in the rough he dealt with them. He knew that Bumpett would never



consent to his turning him out, for the Pig-driver had got Rhys into his power and meant to keep him there, as he had done with himself. It was hard enough to find suitable men for his work—and men who were dependent on him could tell no tales. The old man was exaggerating every difficulty in the way of getting the fugitive out of the country, so that he might retain him where he was and have him at his service; Rhys also was becoming enamoured of the business, which suited him exactly, and growing almost reconciled to his life, now that he could spend his nights outside. Whether there was work on foot or not, he left the cottage with the dark—often with the dusk—remaining out until dawn, and spending most of his day in sleep. Where he went George neither knew nor cared, but the day would come, he thought, when Walters would get over-venturesome, and let himself be seen. Though it would probably involve his own ruin, he prayed that it might be soon. All he longed for was the end of his bondage to his taskmaster, and of the hated company he was enduring.

The Pig-driver ran his trade on bold lines. It had to be largely done to make it pay him, and he had taken two relations into partnership who had butchers' shops in other towns. The farmers who grazed their herds on the mountain-lands of Breconshire, and who suffered from this organized system of marauding, had no idea, in these days of slow communication and inefficient police, how to protect their interests. On the side of the Black Mountain with which we are familiar, they employed watchers for the flocks on dark winter nights, but hitherto George's skill and luck had been greater than theirs, and he left no traces of his deeds behind him. Once the dead animal had disappeared beneath his floor, it emerged again in pieces, for all the cutting up was done below, the skins dried before the fire, and each head with the tell-tale mark on the skull buried in the garden. Only after a fall of snow, when footmarks were ineffaceable, sheep-stealing was an impossibility.

It had been coming down thickly, and after the fall the wind blew billows of white into all the hedgerows, which were broken



in great gaps by the weight; everywhere they were being mended, and George was employed at a place on the further side of the Wye to repair about half-a-mile of damage.

He had finished early, and, after crossing the river, the fancy took him to return along the shore and strike homewards into Crishowell Lane by the toll-house, where Mary was still living with the new toll-keeper's wife. The woman was a good soul, and had nursed her through her trouble, and the girl was to remain with her father's successors until it was settled where she should live, and how she might support herself, and increase the small sum subscribed for her by the public in memory of the dead man.

He went down towards the water and kept along the high bank beside it. It was easy walking, for the wind had blown off the river where it could gather no snow, and the path was almost dry; below him the dark, swirling pools lay like blackened glass under the willows, whose knotted stems overhung them. The fields on his right were three inches deep in their dazzling cover. As his eye roamed over the expanse, some objects in a hollow a short way ahead caught his attention, detaching themselves as he drew near, and he saw that the boys of the neighbouring cottages had been at work. Seven gigantic snow-men were grouped together and stood round in a sort of burlesque Stonehenge, their imbecile faces staring on the monotonous winter landscape. There had been a slight fall since their erection, and though the grass round had been scraped clean by their creators, it was covered with a white powdering, few marks of their work being left. They seemed to have risen from the ground of themselves, seven solitary, self-contained, witless creatures. Not one of them boasted any headgear, all the round bullet heads standing uncovered on the pillar-like bodies; rough attempts at arms had been made, but these had not been a success, for the fragments lay around their feet. Their mouths grinned uniformly, indicated by long bits of stick embedded in the lower part of their jaws, and black



stones above did duty for eyes. George contemplated the vacant crew with a smile. He was in no special hurry, so he stood for some time looking at them.

Silence lay over everything, heavier than the sky, deeper than the snow.

He turned his head towards the Wye, for from somewhere by the bank came the sound of heavy breathing, as of a creature wrestling with a load, pausing occasionally, but recommencing again after a moment's rest. There was a movement among the small branches of an immense willow whose arm stretched over a bit of deep water. The twigs were thick, and the bank shelved out like a roof over the trunk, so, though he could not see the man or beast, he gathered that whichever was struggling there must be down below on a ledge running a few feet above the river. He went cautiously towards the spot and looked over the edge. A woman whom he recognized as Mary Vaughan was scrambling along towards the limb of the great tree. Was he always to be an unwilling spy upon her? he asked himself as he saw her.

He drew back and turned to go, when it struck him that he had better not leave her alone, as her foothold on the rotten bank seemed rather insecure, and he knew the pool below to be one of the deepest in the Wye, so he split the difference by getting behind a holly-bush whose evergreen boughs formed a thick screen in front of him, and through an opening in which he could observe her movements. He could not imagine what she was doing, and, until he saw her reach a place of safety, he determined to stay near. Afterwards he would steal away unperceived.

Mary made her way towards the willow-branch, and, putting her foot upon an excrescence of the bark, she climbed up and seated herself upon it. George could see that her face was drawn and haggard, as the face of one who has not slept for many nights; it was thin too, and the fire of her beautiful eyes seemed drowned in unshed tears. She drew herself along the thickness of the bough until she was two or three yards from



the shore and sat staring before her. A great pang of pity shot through the heart of the man watching her, as it occurred to him that her troubles might have turned her brain. He dared not stir while she sat there so still, for fear of making himself heard, and he held his breath in dread lest she might lose her balance, if startled, and slip from her seat into the pool underneath. Presently she began to fumble with something lying on the bough which he saw to be a piece of rope.

He pressed a little nearer, peering under his hand through the holly-leaves into the gloom of the willow. A large stone was resting just where the branches divided into a fork beyond her, and one end of the rope was tied tightly round it; her efforts to get it into its present position had certainly caused the heavy breathing which had attracted him as he stood by the snow-men. It seemed a miracle that such a slight creature should have found strength to get the unwieldy thing up from the water-side, along the slippery bank and out on to the branch. George stood dumbly gazing at the unconscious woman, his steady-going mind in a turmoil. That she was mad he did not doubt, and that he must do something to get her away from her dangerous seat was certain. While he was debating how he should manage it, she took the slip-knot at the loose end of the rope, and, holding out her feet, began to work it round her ankles. Then he understood that it was not madness he was watching, but the last scene of a tragedy, which, if he did not act at once, would be played before his eyes.

To shout out, forbidding her to do this thing, would, he knew, be useless, for the rope was already round her feet, and she would merely spring off into the water, before he could reach her. With such a weight to drag her down, rescue would be almost impossible from the depths which she had chosen for her grave, and might mean the loss of two lives instead of one. He was not particularly afraid of death, but he liked doing things thoroughly, and, as drowning himself



would not save her, he did not intend to take the risk if he could do without it.

Instinct told him that, apart from all fear of prevention, people do not take their lives in presence of the casual passer-by, and he knew that in assuming that character lay his best chance. Mary had covered her face with her hands as though she were praying, and he seized the moment to get himself on to the path. Then he coughed as unconcernedly as he could, and strolled by the tree swinging his bill-hook. She kept as quiet as a bird sitting on a nest, looking at him with startled eyes.

"Good-day to ye," he began, as he stopped on the bank above her.

Mary murmured something inaudible, and drew her feet as far as she could under her skirt that he might not see the rope.

"That's a rotten bough you be settin' on," he continued ; "come off, or belike it'll break down."

"No, 'tis not," she replied, trembling in every limb ; "you needn't mind me. I'm safe enough."

For reply he laid hold of a projecting root, and swung himself down upon the ledge.

"Look," said he, drawing her attention to a hollow in the limb, and coming a little nearer at each word, "it's all sodden, I tell ye."

For fear of betraying her feet, she did not stir as he advanced ; she remembered him as the man in the churchyard, and she knew his name, but his determined face awed her, and the shining bill-hook in his hand made him look almost as if he were going to attack her.

When he had reached the bough he suddenly sprang upon it, and laid his hand upon her arm. His grip was like iron. Mary screamed aloud ; she had not feared death, but she was terrified of George Williams.

He held her firmly as they sat ; her strained nerves were beginning to give way, and her determination to flutter to



the ground like a piece of paper hurled into the air. She looked round despairingly.

"Put your feet up on the bough, girl," he said sternly.

"I can't," she faltered.

They were sitting upon it side by side, more like a pair of children on a gate, than a man and woman with the shadow of death between them. He was holding her fast with his left hand, but he loosened his grip, and put his arm firmly about her.

"Do as I bid ye," he said, very quietly. "Turn sideways with your back to me and lean against me."

She obeyed.

"Now put your feet up on the bough. Gently, mind."

She drew them up with some difficulty till they rested upon it before her; a piece of the rope lay across the wood near the fork.

"Sit still!" he cried, holding her in a vice.

The bill-hook whirled above them and came down in a clean cut upon the branch; the two ends of the rope fell away, one on either side. George gave the great stone a push with the point of the blade and it fell from its place, splashing into the blackness below and sending up a shower of icy drops. The circles widened and widened underneath till they fell out of shape against the sides of the pool.

"Do ye see that?" he exclaimed, releasing her and looking at her with stern eyes. "Mary Vaughan, that's where you would be now, but that I had been set to take this way an' not the high-road."

She made no reply.

"Will you repent it?" he asked, "or be I to tell on you? They at the toll-house are like enough to shut you up if I do—and 'twill be no more nor their duty too."

Her overwrought mind was beginning to feel the influence of his quiet strength of purpose and she resented it. A sullen expression crossed her face.

"Do as you will," she answered. "What do I care?"



You've done me an ill trick an' I hate you for it. Go, I tell you!"

She turned her head away. He sat quietly beside her, pity and wrath in his heart.

"Will you let me be?" she said, after a pause, turning on him and gathering excitement in her voice.

"I won't."

Then her lips shook and her breast heaved, and she burst into a torrent of helpless tears.

"Poor lass, poor lass," exclaimed the young man; and, with an impulse that had in it no shadow of his sex, he put his arm round her. She clung to him, weeping violently. She would have done the same had he been a stock or a stone. He tossed the bill-hook up on to the bank, and stroked her hair clumsily with his large rough hand.

"Come away from here," he said, when the rush of her grief had subsided, "this is a bad, lonesome place to be in, Mary. I'll lift you down and we'll go up on the bank. If there's aught you want to say to me, say it up there."

He helped her off the bough, and from the ledge up to the path. They stood facing each other.

"And now what can I do?" he asked. "How am I to leave you alone? I can't bide by you all day to see that you come to no harm."

She opened her lips to speak, but no sound came.

"Look," he went on, "will you hearken to one thing I've got to say and not take it ill o' me?"

She raised her eyes to his.

"If you was gone—drowned and gone—who would mind that little one you've brought into the world? Would you leave it alone, poor little babe, to them as might misuse it?"

"But he's dead," she said simply, and the agony in her face made him turn away his own. He met the placid gaze of the snow-men, whose foolish eyes seemed intent upon them both.



"Was that why you was—why I found you there?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes," she said. "I've nothing now, you see. There's none to care."

For some time neither spoke.

"Mary," said Williams at last, his face still turned to the white images in the hollow, "will ye take me for a friend? God knows I bean't no manner o' use."



But those who associated with him had either to take him as they found him or to leave him altogether. Isoline would have preferred to do the latter, for there was in her an antagonism to the boy which had begun the moment she climbed into her uncle's crazy vehicle on the Brecon road. She detested boys of every sort, and this one was decidedly the most horrible specimen of that generation of vipers she had ever come across.

Howlie Seaborne had never before been at close quarters with a young lady, the nearest approach to the species having been those little village girls whose hair he had pulled, and upon whom he had sprung out from dark corners by way of showing his lofty contempt, ever since he could remember. Miss Ridgeway interested him a great deal, and after the few days of close observation which it had taken him to find her a place in his experience, he persisted in regarding her with the indulgence due to a purely comic character.

"There be a gentleman down below," he remarked, when he had finished snorting.

"A gentleman? What gentleman?"

"Moy! Just about as smart as a lord. Oi know 'im too. 'Im as was general o' the soldjers the noight they was foightin' Rebecca. Oi moind 'im, for 'e shook me crewel 'ard by the shoulder." He rubbed the ill-used part.

Isoline shut the door in his face with a bang. The sudden draught put out the candle, and she was obliged to light it again to make the additional survey of her face which the situation below-stairs demanded. She took a hand-glass from the drawer, and assured herself that every view of it was satisfactory; then she hurried down the wooden staircase which creaked under her foot, and stood a moment with beating heart to collect herself at the door of her uncle's study.

Mr. Lewis was standing by the round table in the middle of the room, and before him, with his hand on the mantelpiece, was Harry Fenton. The younger man had one foot on the fender, and from his boots went up a lively steam which showed



that he had ridden over some heavy bits of ground ; his spurs, too, were coated with mud, and he seemed to be appreciating the blaze that leaped gallantly in the chimney. He wore a long cloth coat, which made him look about twice his natural size.

"Mr. Fenton has come over from Waterchurch on business," said Mr. Lewis, turning to her as she entered, "and I am sorry to say that his horse has cast a shoe on the way, and it has delayed his arrival till now. But I have persuaded him to stay here for the night, which is very pleasant."

"It is most kind of you, sir," interrupted Harry.

"My dear boy," exclaimed the Vicar, "it is impossible to think of taking the road again at such an hour, and with such a distance before you as Waterchurch. I am sorry," he went on, taking up a knitted comforter and beginning to put it round his neck, "that I have just been urgently sent for by a parishioner, and shall have to leave you for an hour, but my niece will see that all is made ready for you. Isoline, my dear, I will trust to you to look after Mr. Fenton till I come back."

Harry had started from his home that morning with a couple of instruments in his pockets not generally carried about by riders. They bulged rather inside his coat, and he took great care, as he mounted, that Llewellyn, who was leaning against the stable-wall watching him depart, should not see them ; they were a smith's buffer and a small-sized pair of pincers for drawing nails out of horses' shoes.

His father, with some other county men, was bestirring himself about the putting-up of a stone at Crishowell to the toll-keeper, and had remarked at breakfast that he wanted to consult Mr. Lewis about the inscription. Harry pricked up his ears.

"I suppose I shall have to write another couple of sheets," growled the Squire. "Really, with all the writing I have had to do of late, I am beginning to curse the inventor of the alphabet."



"Can't I help you, sir?" inquired Llewellyn. "I have nothing particular to do this morning."

"Nothing particular to do! What is the use of my keeping an agent, I should like to know, who has 'nothing particular to do'? Eh, sir?"

Llewellyn held his peace.

"I can go to Crishowell, and give your message; I was thinking of riding out that way in any case," said Harry boldly.

The Squire had forgotten the existence of Isoline Ridgeway a couple of days after the ball, and he really wanted to get the business of the gravestone settled. "Very well," he assented, rather mollified, most of his wrath having evaporated upon his youngest son, "but you will have to start soon if you mean to get home again before dark. The roads are pretty bad in this thaw."

So Harry had departed, nothing loth, and Llewellyn again held his peace, though he thought a good deal. He had not forgotten Isoline, but he had sense enough to know how useless speech can be.

The roads were no better than the old Squire had supposed, nevertheless Harry did not seem inclined to get over them very quickly, for he did not once let his horse go out of a sober walk. He had delayed his start till after mid-day in spite of his father's advice, so by the time he reached a secluded bit of lane about half-a-mile from Crishowell village, the afternoon light was wearing itself out beyond the fields and coppices lying westward. Here he dismounted, and leading the animal into a clump of bushes, he took the buffer out of his pocket and began to cut the clinches out of the shoe on the near fore. Then he wrenched it gradually off with the pincers. When this was done, he drew the reins over his arm and tramped sturdily through the mud, carrying it in his hand. In this plight he arrived at the Vicar of Crishowell's door.

When the sound of her uncle's steps had died away down



the flagged path that led through the garden, and Isoline had ordered the spare room to be made ready for the guest, she and Harry drew their chairs up to the hearth.

"You see, I have come as I said I should," he remarked, contemplating the pattern of the hearthrug; "are you glad to see me, Miss Ridgeway?"

"Oh, yes," she replied truthfully.

"Shall I tell you a secret?" said the young man, wearing an expression of great guile. "When the shoe came off I was rather pleased, for I ventured to hope that Mr. Lewis might let me stay to supper while it was being put on. I never expected such luck as being asked to stay the night."

"It would be dreadfully lonely to ride back to Waterchurch Court in the dark. I should not like it, I know; I suppose gentlemen do not mind these things."

"I prefer sitting here with you, certainly," answered Harry, looking into the coals.

"What do you see in the fire?" she asked presently. "Are you looking for pictures in it? I often do."

"I think I see—you."

"That is not very flattering," said Isoline, seeing a compliment floating on the horizon, a little compliment, no bigger than a man's thought, but capable of being worked up into something. "Coals are ugly things, I think, don't you?"

"No, I don't, or I should not have looked for you among them."

She sat quite still in her chair, hoping there was more to follow, but she was disappointed.

"How do you amuse yourself here?" Harry inquired, after a pause.

"There is nothing to amuse me," she replied in her most sophisticated manner. "This is a dull little place for any one who has seen anything of society. It is dreadful never to be able to speak to a lady or gentleman."

"But there's your uncle; my mother always says that Mr. Lewis is the finest gentleman she knows."



This was a new idea, and the girl opened her eyes. "Oh, but he is only an old man," she rejoined.

"What an age it seems since the ball," he said, sighing. "I wish there was another coming."

"So do I."

"When you had gone I found something of yours—something that I shall not give you back unless you insist upon it."

"Something of mine? I do not remember losing anything."

He took a small pocket-book from his coat, and turned over the leaves until he came to a little crushed blue object lying between them.

"Do you know this?" he asked, holding out the book.

She took it with all the pleasure a woman feels in handling the possessions of a man in whom she is interested.

"Ah, yes, that is mine," she exclaimed, flushing as she recognized the flower.

"It was," said Harry, "but it is mine now."

"Well, really!"

"But may I keep it?"

She turned away her head. "You are very foolish, Mr. Fenton."

"I do not mind that."

Isoline took the forget-me-not up between her finger and thumb and twirled it round; then she leaned forward, holding it out above the flame, and looking over her shoulder at her companion.

"Shall I drop it into the fire?" she asked, with a half-smile.

The young man sprang up. "No! no!" he cried, "surely you won't do that! Oh! how very unkind of you!"

She laughed outright. "Well, take it then," she said, tossing it to him.

He replaced it hastily, and put the book back in the pocket of his coat.

"You are afraid I shall change my mind," said Isoline.

"Yes, I am."

She looked at him very softly. "But I shall not," she said.



At this moment the door opened, and Howlie Seaborne came in carrying an armful of wood which he cast unceremoniously into a corner; when he had done this he addressed Harry. "Shall oi give yew one o' Parson's noightshirts?" he inquired, stopping a few paces from him and shouting as though a precipice lay between them.

"What?" said Harry, unable to assimilate his thoughts to the suddenness of the question.

"Be oi to give yew one o' Parson's noightshirts? The cook do say yew're to sleep here, an' yew haven't got one roidin' along o' yew, have yew?"

"Oh, yes, do," replied the young man, smiling, "if Mr. Lewis does not mind."

"Howell," said Isoline with a face of horror, "go away at once, and do not come back unless you are sent for. He is a dreadful creature," she said, as the door closed behind him. "I cannot think how my uncle can employ such an odious boy."

"But he is very amusing."

"Oh, I do not think so."

"Surely I know him," continued Harry. "Isn't he the boy who ran to Llangarth on the night of the riot and brought us the news at the Bull Inn? Of course! He must have something in him or he would not have done that. I must talk to him after."

"You had better not," said she. "He is sure to say something rude."

"I suppose no one has ever heard anything more about Walters," said he; "I hear they have almost given up searching for him. What does your uncle think about it, I wonder?"

"He says he must be half-way to Australia by this time."

"I am afraid he is right," said Harry, the wound Rhys had dealt his vanity smarting, as it always did, at the sound of his name.

"I do believe, if you had three wishes given you, like the people in story-books, one of them would be to catch that man."



"Certainly it would."

"Oh, but there is no use in wishing," said Isoline, shaking her head and feeling quite original.

"Sometimes there is," said Harry, looking at her. "I wished at the ball to be introduced to you, and I was, you see."

"Yes, but if you had wished and done nothing else, it would not have happened," she observed, feeling more original still.

"That is quite true, but, in your case, I was able to do something; I did everything I could in this one, and it was no use. Heavens! how I galloped up those lanes—just a few fields off behind this house too."

The dark had closed in by this time and the dull flash of the Vicar's lantern could be seen as he passed the window; he came into the study and stood warming his cold hands at the blaze. Harry rose deferentially.

"Do not move," said the old man, pushing him back into his seat. "In a few minutes we will go into the other room and you shall explain your father's business to me. It will not interest you, my dear, so you will excuse us," he added, with a courtesy which was enhanced by his grey hair.

When they had left her, Isoline remained with her toes upon the fender in a brown study. She also was looking at pictures in the fire, but, whereas Fenton saw people, she only saw things.

Harry never enjoyed a meal much more than the supper he partook of that evening, though Isoline suffered many pangs as she cast her eyes over the plain fare before them; it must look so mean, she reflected, after the superior glories of the establishment presided over by Lady Harriet Fenton. She saw with satisfaction, however, that the guest ate heartily, and, with slight surprise, that he seemed to like her uncle's company.

That the refinement of atmosphere surrounding one elderly person might blind the eyes to a darned tablecloth was one of those things the society to which she was fond of alluding had not taught her. That the glamour of a lovely face might turn the attention away from it, she had allowed herself to hope.



When the table was cleared and the large Prayer-book placed where the mince and poached eggs had stood, the cook and Howlie Seaborne, who was kept on till bed-time to look after Harry, came in and took their seats in the background. Isoline glanced flippantly across the room at the young man to see whether the homely ceremony would bring a smile to his lips. He caught her look, but the grave simplicity on his face made her avert her eyes and pretend that she had been examining the clock which stood behind him.

As she lay in bed that night thinking over the unlooked-for event of the afternoon, she admitted to herself that he was a much more puzzling person than she had supposed. When he left next morning two pairs of eyes followed him as he disappeared behind the church; one pair belonged to Miss Ridgeway, who was smiling at him from a window, and one to Howlie, who had, for the first time in his life, received a real shock. The shock was a pleasant one, for it had been occasioned by the silver half-crown which lay in his palm.

Llewellyn was the only person in the Waterchurch household who did not accept the episode of the cast shoe without misgiving, for Harry's non-appearance had produced no surprise, the roads being bad and the Vicar of Crishowell hospitable. His vague dislike to Isoline Ridgeway had lately grown more positive, for a little rift had sprung between the two brothers since she had brought her disturbing presence across their way, and the fact that it was there proved to the younger one how great an influence he had over Harry's thoughts. She was the first person who had ever thrust herself through the strong web of friendship which had held them for so many years. They had not exchanged a word about her since they had parted from her at the toll, which was in itself significant, but they knew each other too well to need words. There is no friend so close as the friend to whom one does not tell everything.

Llewellyn had a cooler head than Harry and a finer insight into people, and the want of breeding in Miss Ridgeway was as plain to him as possible. If she had been vulgarly pretty,



with a strident voice and loud manner, he might even have disliked her less, but, as it was, he knew that her soul was vulgar, not her exterior ; unlike most people, he could distinguish between the two. It was no jealousy of a possible wife who would take the first place in his brother's mind which possessed him, for he had always foreseen the day when Harry would marry, and he himself have to take a modest place in the background, and he meant to do it gracefully. But not for Isoline, nor for one like her ; that was beyond him. He cut savagely with the stick he carried at the things in the hedge.

The two young men had avoided each other all day, talking with almost boisterous cheerfulness when a third person was present, and finding urgent occupation in different directions the moment they were left alone. And now, as Llewellyn rounded a corner of the gardener's cottage, they came face to face. An insane desire for action took him.

"For God's sake don't avoid me, Harry," he exclaimed, running his arm through his brother's. Harry turned red.

"I'm not avoiding you, Loo, but I don't know what is the matter with you to-day. Is there anything wrong?"

Llewellyn hated fencing.

"I wish you wouldn't go to Crishowell, Harry."

The elder flared up like a match held over a lamp-chimney.

"Why shouldn't I go, if I choose? What the devil has it got to do with you? Am I to get permission before I take my father's messages?—'Yes, sir, I will go if I can, but I must ask Llewellyn first.'—That would be splendid, wouldn't it? Because I always forgot you were my younger brother, you've forgotten it too. It's my fault, I know!"

Llewellyn dropped his arm as though the words had made it red-hot. His pride in Harry's affection had always been so great that they were like a blow, and he had not the faintest consciousness of superiority to his brother to dull their effect.

"That's true," he said, with a quietness so false that it sobered Harry, "but it need never trouble you again—it can't, for nothing will ever be the same now."



And he opened the door of the kitchen-garden, and was through it and was hurrying along between the box-borders before the other had realized what had happened.

He stood for a moment looking after his brother, and then rushed to the door, knowing that every instant that kept them apart would widen the gulf that had opened between them. But it had slammed to, and, as there was something wrong with the latch, it had the habit of sticking tight and refusing to move when roughly handled. His pull had no more effect upon it than if it had been locked, and he tore and shook at the stubborn thing, feeling like a person in a nightmare whom inanimate objects conspire together to undo. Seeing that his fight with the latch was useless, he set off running round the garden wall to the entrance at its opposite end; it was open when he reached it, for Llewellyn had come through and was standing by a bed of Christmas roses whose dragged petals had evidently not recovered from the recent thaw.

"Loo! Loo! don't go!" he cried as he saw him turn away. "Oh, Llewellyn! I didn't mean that, I didn't mean it!"

The younger brother's face was white, and he looked dumbly at the other.

"What a cur I am!" cried Harry, seizing his hand. "Don't stare at me, Llewellyn—say something, for Heaven's sake!"

"I should not have spoken," said Llewellyn hoarsely.

"Say anything you like—anything, only forgive me! forgive me!" cried generous Harry.

Llewellyn's hand, which had lain passive in his brother's, began to tighten. "Don't, Harry," he said. "It's all right. I will never say anything about it again, I had no right to interfere."

"But that's worse. It is terrible to think we can't talk to each other. Just say out what you think, Loo, and I'll listen; I haven't been able to speak a word to you of late, but I wish we could have it out now."

They were walking down the laurel shrubbery leading from



the garden to the home farm, Llewellyn's chief anxiety and the Squire's dearest toy. The old wall which ran outside it smelt damp, a background of sodden red to the rank, shining leaves. A cock robin, whose figure had filled out considerably since the thaw, was sending forth his shrill, cold voice in recognition of this crowning mercy. The breath of rotting chrysanthemums came from the beds by the tool-house.

"How much do you really care for her?" asked Llewellyn after a pause.

"A lot!"

"But how much? More than Laura? More than Kitty Foster?"

"Oh, Laura! that was nothing. And Kitty Foster, that was different too."

"But you were half mad about her once. Don't you remember when she went away, what a state you were in and how you raged?"

"Ah, I was younger then," replied Harry, with all the wisdom of his twenty-five years strong upon him.

"Is it because she is so pretty that you like Miss Ridgeway?" asked Llewellyn.

"That and heaps of other things."

"Do you think she likes you?"

"Yes, I am nearly sure of it."

"Well, then, I'm not," said his brother shortly.

"But, my good man, how can you tell?" exclaimed Harry, rather nettled.

"She does not care for anything—at least, for nothing but herself."

Harry was on the verge of flying out again, but he remembered the latch of the garden-door, and refrained.

"I know you are mistaken," he said, "you can't think how glad she was to see me yesterday."

"I don't doubt that," replied the other dryly.

"But why do you doubt her liking me? I am not such a brute that no girl could look at me; I dare say I am no beauty,



but, after all, I am neither lame nor a fright, nor hump-backed, nor crooked, nor squint-eyed, am I?"

Llewellyn laughed outright. "Hardly. But she's a nobody, and you're somebody, d'you see, Harry."

"I did not know you cared about those sort of things," remarked his brother scornfully.

"I'm not sure that I should if she were the right kind of girl. But I'm sure she isn't. She thinks it would be a fine thing to be Mrs. Fenton, and I have no doubt she fancies you have lots of money, because you look smart and all that—she doesn't understand how hard-up we are. I could guess that she was thinking about it that day on the coach."

Harry was rather impressed.

"Of course it's a grand thing for her having you dangling about ; girls like that sort of thing, I know. But I wouldn't if I were you."

"One can't look at any one else when she's there," sighed the other.

"Then don't go there. I wish you could keep away from that place for a little bit, then you might forget her. And if you couldn't," added the astute Llewellyn, "after all, she will be there for ever so long and you will have plenty of chances of going to Hereford when she returns to her aunt. Try, Harry."

The younger brother's influence had always been so strong that the elder was never entirely free from it ; he had looked at things for so many years of boyhood through Llewellyn's eyes, that he had never quite lost the habit, though the separation which manhood brought them had weakened it a little.

"Well, I shan't have any pretext for going to Crishowell for some time," he said slowly. "You've made me rather miserable."

Llewellyn said no more, but he felt that he had gained something.



## CHAPTER XV

### THE BEGINNING

GEORGE WILLIAMS' education had been a very elementary and spasmodic thing. In days of comparative prosperity, when he was a small boy, he had learned to read and write and add up a little, but his mother's widowhood had sent him out to field-work at an age when the village urchins of the present day are still wrestling with the fourth "standard."

That most irksome of all tools, the pen, was lying before him on the box which served as a table, and he stared sorrowfully at it and the cheap ink-pot beside it; now and then he took himself sternly by the front hair as though to compel his brain to come to the assistance of his hand.

The cottage was very quiet, and the door stood open to let in what remained of the afternoon light. Below Rhys, who had spent the whole of the preceding night out of doors, was making up for lost sleep upon his pile of sheepskins, for, since his recovery, Williams' bedding had been restored to its rightful place. The brook gurgled outside. He shoved the paper away impatiently and sat back in his chair. All his efforts had only resulted in two words which faced him on the otherwise blank sheet. He laid his unlighted pipe down on them, for he heard Rhys' footsteps upon the ladder below the flooring, and he did not want him to see what he had written. The two words were "Dere Mary."

The composition of this letter had hung over him for some days, for, besides his poor scholarship, he was one of those people whose powers of expression are quite inadequate to



their need of expressing. He knew this very well, and it depressed him a good deal. He had made up his mind to ask Mary Vaughan to be his wife.

It is doubtful whether five people out of every ten who contemplate marrying do so from devotion pure and absolute, so in this George was no worse than many of his neighbours. He certainly was not in love with Mary, for he could hardly tell whether he would be glad or sorry if she refused him, but he was inclined to think, sorry. His main reason, which swallowed up any other, was pity—pity and the longing to protect a stricken creature. The type of theorist perfect in all points except discrimination in human nature would have smiled deprecatingly and assured him that he was a fool, that what had happened once must inevitably happen twice, and that he would be like the man in *Æsop's* fable who had warmed a frozen viper on his hearth and been bitten for his pains. But he knew better. That Mary was not a light woman he could see easily—so easily indeed that he had never given the matter the consideration of a moment. He merely knew it. Also there lurked in him an odd feeling which one might almost call an economical one; they had both made a terrible muddle of their lives and gone the wrong ways to their own undoing, and if they could but convert their two mistakes into one success, it would be a distinct gain. He was a lonely man too, and the presence of a young and comely woman in his home would be very pleasant to him. He wondered whether she liked him much—he did not for an instant fancy that she loved him, for he knew that her heart was dead inside her, and he was quite unconscious that one thing that drew him to her was his complete understanding of her. It is a kindness we do when we really understand another human being—given a not ignoble one—and the doing of a kindness produces affection more surely than the receiving of one. The chief drawback to his plan was his bondage to the Pig-driver, for until that was over he could not marry; but he was putting by little sums earned with his hedging and ditching and other



journeyman work, and on these he hoped they might start their married life when he had served his time with Bumpett. Could he make money enough to pay his debts to his task-master he would break with him at once, knowing that the old man in exposing his thefts would have to expose his own also. But his earnings were so small that all these were only forlorn hopes.

Rhys came up through the trap-door under the sacks. As he appeared in the doorway of the partition George saw that he had a stick in his hand.

"You're not thinking to go out, surely?" he remarked.

"I am," was the short reply.

"But the light's not gone yet; you'll be collared one of these days," said Williams, more as a sop to his own conscience than from any interest.

"If I don't care, you needn't."

"I don't—not a damn," replied Williams; "you can get clapped into prison any day you like."

Walters left the house in so reckless a humour that he scarce bestowed a precautionary glance on his surroundings when he crossed the plank, and as the old cart-road led only to the most carefully avoided place within, possibly, a hundred miles, he was the less inclined to thwart his mood. Though the dusk had barely begun to confuse distant outlines, he strolled carelessly up the hillside, his mind full of irritated contempt for George. It was hard to him that a man of his intelligence and standing should have to tolerate the society of a clown, one whose sole merit of brute strength was unilluminated by any ray of good feeling or geniality. When he arrived at the bit of scrubby ground by the Pedlar's Stone, he turned and looked down the track he had ascended towards the valley.

On either side lay the slope, unbroken except by ragged bushes and briers; out of one of these which clothed a bank stuck the Pedlar's Stone. It looked sinister enough thrusting its black form through the thorns. A little way beyond was the rock under which the Pig-driver had made so snug a larder,



and two or three slabs not unlike it were scattered round. He sat down upon one of them; there were limits to his imprudence, and he did not mean to venture farther away until the light had completely gone. Night outside had of late become as familiar to him as day, the sleeping world as important as the waking one; he felt almost like a man endued with an extra sense, for that half of life which for the healthy sleepers of the earth is simply cut out, was a living reality to him. The gulf of oblivion which divides one day from another for most people was ceasing to exist, and in its place was a time with its own aspects and divisions, its own set of active living creatures whose spheres of work belonged properly to the darkness and stillness. He had a feeling of double life. Eastern ascetics whose existences are spent in lonely places, in vigils, in silence, in the fastnesses of strange hills, know this. To the Western mind, so curiously incapable of understanding anything which does not assail it through its body, and which has such a strange pride in its own limitations, such things are folly. But the double life is there, the pulsations of knowledge which can be dimly heard through that receptiveness of mind born of long silence, and though Rhys knew it as little as do most of his nation, he had a dim consciousness of change. That the quietness of night soothed him was all he understood or ever would understand; he longed for it to come as he sat looking over the fading landscape. And it was coming—coming as surely as that other influence of which he did not dream, but which even then stood behind him.

A sound aroused him; he turned with dismay and saw that he was not alone. He sprang up and found himself face to face with a woman. A glance showed him that she was a stranger, and though he was dismayed at the consequences of his rashness, it was reassuring to see from her manner that she was entirely occupied with her own affairs.

"I beg your pardon," she began, "I am sorry to interrupt you, but I am in trouble. I have wandered about for I cannot



tell how long—hours, I think—and I have lost myself. I am *so* tired." There was almost a sob in her voice as she sank upon the stone on which Rhys had been sitting. "I beg of you, sir, to show me the way back to Crishowell."

She was stooping down and holding her ankle in her hand as though it hurt her; her boots were thin and cut in places, and the mud had almost turned them from their original black to brown. She was evidently young, though her thick veil hid her features, and her clothes were absurdly unsuited to her surroundings.

"Oh, my foot!" she exclaimed, "I have hurt my foot. Something ran into it as I came through those bushes."

Rhys looked down.

"It is bleeding," he said, noticing a reddish spot which was soaking through the mud. "Your boots are not strong enough for such places."

"I did not mean to come up here. I went for a walk from my uncle's house in Crishowell. I only intended to go a little distance up the hill, but I could not find my way back, and there was no one to direct me after I had passed the village. Does nobody live about here?"

"Not near here, certainly," he replied.

"And how far do you think I am from Crishowell?"

"About three miles."

"Three miles!" exclaimed the girl, hardly restraining her tears. "How can I ever get home? And with this foot, too."

"Perhaps a thorn has gone into it," he suggested. "If you will take off your boot I'll look and see what is wrong."

She bent down and began to unfasten it. Rhys looked anxiously about them and saw with satisfaction that the dusk had increased and would soon have fallen completely. He knelt down in front of her, and she straightened herself wearily, glad for her gloved fingers to escape the mud. When he pulled off the boot she gave a little cry of pain, and he looked up at her. She had put back her veil, and for the first time he saw her face. A look of admiration came into his own. She read



the expression behind his eyes as she might have read the story in a picture, and it affected her like a draught of wine. Her fatigue was almost forgotten; she only felt that she was confronted by one of the most attractive and uncommon-looking of men, and that he admired her.

"Can you see anything in my foot?" she inquired, lowering her eyes.

He examined it carefully.

"There's a very long thick thorn; it has run in nearly half-an-inch. I'm likely to hurt you pulling it out, but out it must come."

"Very well," she said.

He took out his knife.

"Oh, what are you going to do?" she cried in alarm.

"There's a small pair of pincers in it. It will be best to use that."

Isoline shut her eyes and drew her breath quickly; as the thorn came out she shuddered and put out her hand.

"I am afraid you must think me a great coward," she faltered. "You would not behave like that, I am sure."

"I am not so delicate as you. You ought never to trust yourself in these rough places alone."

"And now I have all these three miles to go alone in the dark, and I am so afraid. I may meet cows or animals of some kind. Look how dark it has become."

"If you will rest a little I will go with you part of the way. I can't come as far as Crishowell, but I'll take you till we can see a farm-house where they'll give you a lantern and a man to carry it before you to the village."

"Oh, thank you. How very kind you are."

He laughed. "Am I?" he said. "'Tis a mighty disagreeable piece of business for me, isn't it?"

There are many ways of conveying admiration, and Rhys' voice was expressive.

Isoline was engaged with her boot, and he sat down beside her on the rock. It was almost dark.



Like all who saw Rhys Walters for the first time she was considerably puzzled to know who and what he might be, and his surroundings gave no clue to his position. His clothes were good, being his own, for though Bumpett had counselled him to borrow from George, he would never condescend to wear anything belonging to him. He spoke well when he gave himself the trouble, and Isoline, who was not as discriminating as she might have been, admired his assurance.

Since the young man had been in hiding he had heard little of what was going on in the neighbourhood, George being uncommunicative, and it was only occasionally that he saw the Pig-driver. His beautiful companion puzzled him as much as he puzzled her, for he knew that, had he seen her face before, he could never have forgotten it.

His safety now lay in the possibility of her not describing him to any one, and he would have to secure her promise of silence, a precarious barrier indeed between him and detection. It had been the thousand chances to one against his meeting any one at that hour and place, but the one chance had turned up and confounded him. He was running perilously near the rocks.

"I think I ought to be starting for home," said Isoline's voice at his side after some time. "I am rested, and my foot is hardly painful since you have taken the thorn out. You have been very kind to me," she added softly.

"Well, be grateful to me."

"Oh, I am indeed."

"Then stay a little longer to show it," he said boldly, "it's such a treat to look at a face like yours."

"Why, you cannot see me in this darkness," replied Isoline, tossing her head, but apparently regarding his remark as perfectly natural.

"But I know you are there, and when you are gone, who can tell when I shall see you again? You don't know how terribly I'd like to."

There was real feeling in his voice.



She was rather taken aback. "Who are you?" she said suddenly.

"If you will tell me your name I will tell you mine."

"I am Miss Isoline Ridgeway, and my uncle is Mr. Lewis, the Vicar of Crishowell."

"I don't know him," said Rhys. "I am a stranger."

"You have not told me who you are," said the girl, after a silence in which he was preparing his answer.

"I'm called Kent—Robert Kent," he replied, giving the name of a boy who had been at school with him.

"That sounds very romantic," observed Isoline; "like an outlaw or a murderer in a tale."

Rhys winced in the darkness.

"I must go now," she said, rising. "You will come with me?"

"That I will—as far as I can. Tell me, am I never to see you any more?"

"I am sure I don't know," she replied, turning away.

"Would you ever care to set eyes on me again?" He took her hand, and she did not draw it away from him.

"Yes, I think I should."

"Then promise never to tell any one I met you here."

"Oh, I will not say anything."

"It's a promise, then. Give me your two hands on it."

She held out the other, and he kissed them both.

"Will you come back here some day soon?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"Oh, I couldn't. And I should never find my way."

"You could if I told you how to. You could ask for the farm I am going to take you to, and then 'twould be only a little bit further; and none can see you these dark evenings."

"I must go," she said; "don't ask me such things."

The night was, by this time, lying on the hillsides like a black cloth, and they crossed the rough turf, Isoline tripping and knocking her unaccustomed feet against the stones. A thrill



went through Rhys as she took his arm at his suggestion ; she could feel his heart beating against her hand. It was very interesting, she thought, and she hardly regretted having lost herself, though she had been frightened enough at the time.

They walked along the high ground until the lighted windows of a farm were visible on a slope below them, and then began to descend ; at the outer side of a wall they stopped. "I can't come any further," he said, "but I'll help you over this. There's the house, straight in front of us. Tell them you've missed your road, and ask them to send a man with a light."

He took her by the waist, and lifted her on to the top of the wall, then swung himself over and stood before her on the inside of the enclosure. "If you come back," he said, "and keep straight on above this along the hillside, you'll get to the place where I met you to-night. Do you see ?"

She made no answer. She would not slip down from her seat for fear of falling into his arms.

"I shall wait there every evening at dusk," said Rhys, looking up at her through the blackness.

"Let me go, please let me go !"

He put up his arms and lifted her down.

"Good-bye," she said.

"But you will think of it," he begged, detaining her.

She shook herself free and flitted like a shadow into the night. The word "Perhaps" floated back to him through the dark.

He stood for some time looking at the twinkling light of the farm ; soon a large steady one emerged from it, moving forward slowly, and he guessed that Isoline's lantern-bearer was piloting her home. The light wound along, leaving a shine behind it, against which he could see the dark outline of some moving thing, turned, wavered at the place where he knew there was a gate, and finally disappeared. He climbed to the high ground and set his face in the direction of the Pedlar's Stone. Though



pitch dark, it was still early, which made him anxious to get back to the shelter of its ill-omened presence, for his feeling of security had been shaken.

In spite of this he went along with the tread of a man who is light of heart, his head full of the fascinating personality whose existence had been unknown to him a few hours before, but whose appearing had let loose a whole flock of new possibilities. He thought of her voice, of her little slender feet, of the brilliant face that had dawned upon him through the dusk with the turning back of her veil, of her pretty gesture of terror as she saw him draw out his knife; he went over in his mind each word she had said to him since the instant he had sprung up from the rock and found her standing behind him. Even her very name was a revelation of delicacy and ornament; Isoline—Isoline—Isoline—he said it over to himself again and again; it was to the Janes and Annes of his experience as a hothouse flower is to cottage herbs, a nightingale's song to the homely chatter of starlings, a floating breath from the refinements which exist apart from the rough utilities of the world. He sighed impatiently as another face thrust itself between him and his new ideal. To think that he had ever supposed himself dominated by it! Mary's eyes had once illumined him, Mary's personality held his senses and feelings, but he laughed at himself for his blindness in having picked up a wayside pebble and imagined it a jewel.

Rhys had a certain amount of imagination, and femininity in one shape or another had been a necessity to him all his life; part of the repulsion he had often felt for his mother was due to the systematic way in which she had divested herself of every shred of feminine attraction in domestic life. This had not come to her as the result of Puritanic sympathies. Before religion had taken hold upon her the romance of all womanhood, of love, of marriage, of motherhood, had been an offence. She approved of people who led happy married lives, but it was an approval of the conventionality of the relationship;



that the husband should remain the lover, the wife the mistress, was an idea to be dismissed with scorn. Marriage was a duty, and woman's personal attraction a quality to be reduced to the level of handsome domestic furniture, a credit to the home which contained it. That a married man and woman of more than a year's standing should be in love with each other was more than an absurdity, it was almost an indecency. Since he had been able to think at all, Rhys had dimly felt this, for it is a frame of mind of whose existence in a woman no masculine human being is ever quite unconscious. When he had grown old enough to understand it, it had given him a violent push in the opposite direction, and set his adolescent brain in a flame.

It was so dark when he reached the Pedlar's Stone that he had to grope about among the bushes to find it, and he traced his way from it with difficulty to the rock on which he and Isoline had sat. He would come there the next evening and the evening after—every day until the early rising moon should make it impossible. He began to reckon up the calendar on his fingers, trying to make out how many light nights there would be in the following month; February had begun, and the days were lengthening slowly, but by the middle of March there would be no more chances of meeting. Though she had only said "Perhaps," his hopes were rampant, for he had not been accustomed to neglect where women were concerned. He did not undervalue the risk he was running by putting himself in the power of a girl's idle tongue, yet he never hesitated; he was like the miner who will not be deterred from lighting his pipe in the danger-laden atmosphere of the mine. He was a cautious man in ordinary things; it had taken him some time to make up his mind to join Rebecca, and, when he had done so, he had arranged an elaborate scheme for his own security instead of trusting to luck with his companions. But the life of successful hiding which he now lived was making him reckless, and where a woman was in the question he had



always been ready to throw common-sense to the winds. He did not trouble himself to think what the end of this unexpected interest might be ; in any case it would put a zest into the constrained life he led just as sheep-stealing had done. Would she forget him or refuse to return to the Pedlar's Stone ? That was the only anxiety he had, but it was a very half-hearted one, for he felt sure she would not. A future of pleasant dallying lay indefinitely before him, he hoped, with the prospect of a voyage, when the Pig-driver should assure him that all was quiet, and a new life begun in a new country.

His regret for Mary had vanished utterly. As he had been to Crishowell church once or twice, he knew Mr. Lewis perfectly by sight, and the irony of things made him smile as he realized that, in his own former respectable personality of Mr. Walters of Great Masterhouse, he could never have hoped to speak to the Vicar's lovely niece. He was a farmer, he reflected, she a lady, not knowing that no circumstances in this world could have made Isoline Ridgeway a gentlewoman. It pleased him to find that, as he had slipped from his original and obvious surroundings, she had evidently taken him for a man of her own class. His feeling of exhilaration made him wish for some one to whom he might pour out the praises of Isoline ; in presence of a companion the thought of her would have loosened his tongue like wine mounting to his brain. He longed to shout, to cry her beauty aloud, to flaunt it and her condescension to him in the faces of other men, but there was no one he could speak to except a dull yokel, to whom the very name of love would convey nothing but the most ordinary instincts. It was hard ; but he felt that, in spite of all his misfortunes, he was in the better case of the two. He could at least appreciate the high pleasures open to humanity, for his soul was not bounded by the petty fence of commonplace which enclosed George and shut out his view of life's loftier things.

He comforted himself with that ; yet, as he sat on the rock, his mind filled with the radiance left by Isoline, the picture of



the sheep-stealer's unemotional face, set in the ugly framing of the cottage walls, seemed to him like the shadow of some sordid implement of labour against a moonlit landscape.

One must pay for everything in this world; even high-mindedness costs its owner something.



## CHAPTER XVI

### IN WHICH GEORGE PROVES TO BE BUT HUMAN

THE letter which had presented such difficulties to George was finished at last, and while Rhys was sitting with Isoline upon the rock, he was trudging down to Crishowell with it in his pocket. At the village he captured a stray urchin to whom he confided it, promising him a penny, which was to be paid on the following day at twelve o'clock; the boy was to go to the blacksmith's shop, where his patron would await the expected answer. He did not tell him to bring it to the cottage, as, since Rhys' arrival, he had strongly discouraged all visitors.

"Dere Mary," he had written, "I write these few lines hoping you wil not take it il 'tis trewly ment. Dere Mary, wil you have me? What is dun is dun and can't be undun so take hart. I wil be a good husband and love you well never doute it.

"Yours trewly,

"GEORGE WILLIAMS."

When the letter reached its destination, Mary was looking out of the diamond-paned window of the toll-house, and as she opened the door to the boy's knock, he thrust it into her hand, telling her he would come for the answer in the morning. She took it in, and went up with it to the little room where she slept, for there was no light in the kitchen. Lighting a tallow dip which stood in a tin candlestick, she sat down, spreading



the paper out in front of her ; a letter was such an unusual thing in her experience that she opened it with a sort of mis-giving. She read it to the end hurriedly, as hurriedly as her inefficiency and the cramped handwriting would permit, but it was so exceedingly surprising that she could hardly take it in ; it lay on the table in the circle of yellow light, a dumb, yet disturbing thing, knocking like an unbidden guest at the closed door of her heart. It brought the strong face of the man with the bill-hook before her, an intruder, almost a vision of fear.

She felt that it was incumbent upon her to feel something, but what she could not tell, and she laughed as she folded the letter and pushed it underneath the candlestick. When she went down again to the kitchen where the new toll-keeper and his wife were sitting, they looked at her with solemn curiosity, such as was due to the recipient of a letter, but she made no allusion to it, and went up early to bed after supper, leaving the two by the fire.

Before putting out the light, she read George's proposal over again, and repeated it to herself as she lay in her attic with her eyes on the patch of starlit sky which filled the window high up in the roof. How often she had lain there, with her little child in her arms, and watched the handle of the Plough describing its quarter-circle on the heavens. She remembered that and buried her face in the pillow. She wondered whether there was any one in the world so entirely alone as herself, and though she thought with gratitude of the couple sleeping peacefully in the room off the kitchen below, she knew very well that she had no place in their lives. The world—that void peopled with strangers—confronted her, and she had no more spirit left with which to meet it, for her arms were empty of the burden that alone had given her courage.

The excitement which comes upon nervous people at night in the presence of difficulties took hold of her ; one bugbear after another pressed upon her brain, and though the attic was cold, she sat up as the hours went by, feverish with contending



thoughts, and saw the whiteness of the letter lying on a chair under the window.

It would be a solution to many anxieties, though hardly the one she would have chosen ; but beggars cannot be choosers, and she allowed herself to dwell upon the idea, with the result that as it grew more familiar, it also grew less formidable. She did not want to marry—why could he not give her his friendship only, with no thought of any other relationship? She needed that, and since it had been offered, the knowledge of it had been a greater support than she could have supposed. On first reading the letter she had lost the sense of this, but now it came back, and George's calm personality was a soothing thing to think about. She shut her eyes, and brought back to her mind that terrible hour by the river, and all he had done for her. He had gone with her to the toll-house door that day, and left her taking with him a promise that she would never attempt her own life again.

The restraint of the letter gave her confidence. She felt that, had he made a declaration of love as well as an offer of marriage, she could not have listened to it for a moment ; she had had enough of love, were it false love or true. If he married her he would be marrying her out of pity, and she almost thought that she liked and trusted him enough to accept the fact. Had he asked for love she could not have pretended to give it him. But he had asked for nothing. It was like a business proposal, so dispassionate was it. He had said, "I will love you well never doute it," but that gave promise of the loyal affection of a tried companion, not the passion of a lover for the woman loved, and it demanded nothing in return, not even gratitude, though she felt that she could and would give him plenty of that. She would have a home, and she did not doubt that it would be a better one than many a woman got whose domestic relations were considered fortunate. The quiet of the thought calmed her, and she fell asleep while she turned over the restful possibility in her mind.

In the morning she rose early and went down to the kitchen



to light the fire, for she had lately made a practice of this, being glad to do anything to help the toll-keeper's wife. As she laid the wood she thought of the letter waiting to be answered. Morning had almost brought the decision to say "No." Everything seemed less formidable in the daylight, and sleep had steadied her nerves and cleared away the spectres of the darkness; it was not until she had sat down in the attic, pen in hand, to renounce the haven held open for her that she wavered. While she hesitated the boy knocked at the door below, and standing at the turning-point of her way, Mary's heart failed her.

She wanted time. In a few minutes she had got no nearer to her decision, and the messenger waiting in the road began to kick the doorstep impatiently. She tore the sheet of paper in half, and wrote on the blank part of it.

"Dear George Williams, i dont know what to do i cant say yes nor no. i know you are a good man and many thanks. forgive me i mean to do rite i will send the anser to Crishowell on market day your obliged friend

"MARY VAUGHAN."

She had received a little education, and had taught herself a good deal during her intimacy with Rhys, spending many evenings in attempts to improve in reading and writing. What puzzled her most in the present case was how to address her suitor, and, more than all, how to subscribe herself. She wondered, as she watched the boy's back retreating towards Crishowell, whether she had done so rightly. He was her friend, she told herself, and she was obliged indeed.

On market day George prepared to go down to the toll and hear his fate. His objection to letting his messenger come to the cottage was his reason for this, and not any excitement brought on by the occasion. He was no hot-headed lad rushing off to his sweetheart; he was a man with whom life had gone wrong, so wrong as to have given him a very



present determination to prevent another life from sliding down the hill into that slough which had all but swallowed up his own. He was struggling in it yet, and he could not hope to set his feet on firm ground for some time to come. But when that day should arrive, and he could begin to toil up the slope again, he meant to tow up an extra burden with him. He felt himself strong and hard and patient, and he liked to think that his strength and hardness and patience might do for two.

In spite of the absence of romance in his wooing, he determined that no outward sign of it should be missing from his errand—he felt it to be due to Mary. The butterfly, whose wings had been scorched by the fires of life, should be pursued with nets and lures as though it were the most gaudy and unattainable of winged creatures. For this reason his best suit of working-clothes (he possessed no Sunday ones) had been carefully brushed over-night, and his boots cleaned. He ducked his head into the water-bucket and scrubbed it with his coarse towel, flattening and smoothing his hair before the scrap of looking-glass till it shone. He shaved himself with great care, and trimmed the two inches of whisker, which made lines in front of his ears, until they became mere shadings, and then took from some hidden lair, in which he kept such things, a purple neckcloth with white bird's-eye spots on it. This he tied with infinite care. As he was dusting his hat he looked up, to see Rhys standing in the doorway of the partition; he had been so much occupied with his dressing that he had not heard him come up the ladder. He turned very red. Walters was smiling contemptuously. "You're very fine this morning," he said, with his eye resting on a patch just below George's knee, "I suppose you're going courting."

Williams took up the rabbit-headed stick, and for answer unlocked and opened the door which had its key always turned as a protective measure when there was the chance of Rhys coming up-stairs.

Before shutting it he dropped the key into his pocket.



"I'm taking this along with me," he remarked, "so you may just get down below again." It was the first piece of active malice into which the other had provoked him.

As he went towards the village he picked a bit of holly from a bush and stuck it into his buttonhole. It added a good deal to his festal air, and the bright sun exhilarated him after the cold water he had applied to himself so copiously. The stolid gloom which seemed to surround him on ordinary days had lifted, and any one meeting him that morning and looking at him without pleasure would have been a dullard. He had health, strength greater than that of most men, and he was only twenty-eight years old. And he had a face that no living thing could doubt.

He hit out cheerfully at the dry little oak-apples in the hedge, for Rhys' sneer had run off him like water off the traditional duck's back, and been swallowed in the thought of its perpetrator tied to the underground room till his return. When generous people are goaded into malice they get their money's worth out of the experience, and Williams' little excursion into the devil's dominions had done him a world of good. His prospects were no better than they had been on the preceding night, and he was about to try and hang an additional weight round his neck, but human nature and a spotted neckcloth will do wonders for a man sometimes, and the sense of well-being pervaded everything. Nevertheless, as he turned into the Brecon road, and met the toll-people on their way to Llangarth market, his spirits waned a little from pure fear of the matter in hand, and he stood before the door waiting admittance, sincerely hoping that Mary might not see how his hands shook.

Mary had determined on the answer she would give. Through all her wrongs and troubles she had set up a certain standard of right for herself, and she did not mean to sink below it; whatever her shortcoming in other ways had been, she had injured none but herself, and on none but herself should the reckoning fall. What preserved the strong tower of self-respect in her was that fact, and were she to lose sight of it,



the whole edifice would crumble to the earth. In the terrors of the night, indeed, she had wavered and almost resolved to take the home offered without more ado, but with the new strength that comes to young lives with sunrise, she had put the idea away from her. No one else should pay, no one else should suffer, least of all George Williams who was her friend. She was thinking of him when she heard his knock, and opened the door to find him standing on the other side of it.

He walked into the house without waiting to be invited, and shut the door behind him. The blood tingled in his face, which was ruddy with the morning air, and the holly in his coat made a bright spot of colour in the room ; his large frame seemed larger by contrast with the furniture.

"Will you please to sit down?" said she, mechanically pushing forward the wooden chair in which her father had been used to sit.

"Thank ye, no, I'd best stand," answered George.

So they faced each other, the man with his back to the window. Mary had only seen him twice before, but a very definite idea of him had remained in her mind, and as he stood there she felt as though she were looking at a totally different person. He was younger, smarter, and it made her hot to think that she had leaned against his shoulder and wept her heart out in the circle of his arm. Then, he had been simply a protector, but now he had turned into a powerful-looking young man in a purple neckcloth. He had called himself her friend, but he was a stranger and she had no right in his life—certainly no right to spoil it with her ruined one. Her heart beat quick as she held the back of the chair.

"I've come to get the answer," said Williams simply.

"I can't! I can't do it," replied the girl.

There was silence in the little room, and the two cheap clocks which stood on the dresser ticked loudly, one half a second behind the other. He drew an imaginary line on the floor with the ash-plant in his hand.



"Well, I'm sorry," he said, looking down at the point of the stick. She did not speak.

"I suppose you couldn't come to like me in time? Likely enough I bean't the sort for a girl to fancy, but ye shan't rue it if ye take me. Don't be afeard."

She looked up and saw behind the calm, heavy face into the upright soul of the sheep-stealer, and the sight made her more determined. "It's not that. But don't you ask me, George Williams—don't you, for I can't."

"D'ye think I shouldn't like ye enough?" he asked, after a pause. "Is it that that's the trouble?"

"Ye may like me a bit," she answered boldly, "but it's goodness wi' you, not love."

"I like you well," he said, "don't disbelieve me. Mary, Mary, you're not taking on about that—about Walters o' Masterhouse, curse him?"

"I can't but think of him. I hate him, but I think of him."

"You hate him, Mary?"

"I saw my father lyin' dead i' this room. Lyin' there on the bed. They fetched it in. Oh, my God! my God!" She turned away from him. "Go! Go!" she cried, facing round again, "and I'll think of your goodness, that I will; but I can't take ye, George, so let me be."

"Mary," he persisted, "will you let me come back? Maybe, as time gets on, you'd forget a bit."

He had come to her meaning to act the part of a lover conscientiously, but he was finding little need for acting; no woman he had ever seen appealed to him as this one did. He stood in the middle of the room unwilling to go. She came up to him, and laying her fingers upon his arm, urged him towards the door. When they reached the lintel, he took hold of her hand. "Let me come again," he begged, "let me come back. Do, Mary, do."

"No, no," she exclaimed, drawing it away, "'tis no manner o' use. Good-bye; go now, good-bye."

George Williams was but human, and his heart was bounding



within him. "All right," he said, thickly, "I'll be off then. But oh, Mary, give me one kiss before I go!" and, in his earnestness, he made as though he would draw her towards him.

She sprang back, blushing scarlet to the roots of her hair. "Ah!" she cried, "an' I thought you were different!"

Before he had realized what had happened she had shut the door, and he heard the bolt shoot into its place. He stood in the road, mortified, ashamed, furious with himself. But as he turned to make his way home between the leafless hedges, he knew that he loved her.

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## CHAPTER XVII

### THE SHEEP-STEALERS PART COMPANY

HE hurried along with the tread of a man who hopes to lose a remembrance in the tumult of his going. He had failed in every way; failed in respect to the creature whom he had resolved so fixedly to protect, and beside whom every other worldly object had all at once become unimportant. It seemed that he was always to show himself in a different light to the one which illumined his heart. His evil luck willed it so, apparently. He loved truth, and yet he lay bound in a tangle of dishonesty; he loved independence, and he was in the hollow of a rogue's hand; he loved to be at peace with all men, and his companion's daily aim was to rouse his temper; and lastly, he loved Mary Vaughan, and by his own folly he had caused her to shut her door in his face.

He felt his incapacities keenly, and the brave holly-sprig in his buttonhole was no longer an expression of his mood but a mockery of it. In his self-abasement he did not suspect that she had been hard upon him, nor could he know how the sudden revelation of his masculinity had effected her as he came into the cottage. He had expected to take up their relationship where he had left it on the river-bank near the snow-men, not understanding that it was an abnormal one, risen from abnormal circumstances and passing with them.

He went through Crishowell looking neither to the right nor left and never slackening his pace, and he was remarked only by such idlers as were gathered round the blacksmith's shop. At that hour of the morning the village people had other



things to think of besides their neighbours' affairs ; that was a pleasure reserved for the later part of the day. He rushed past the churchyard in which he had first seen Mary sitting by her father's grave, and had watched the burial from under the yew. As he crossed a field on the way upwards, he saw Bumpett driving in his spring cart down the lane, his hat bobbing above the hedge with the jolting of the wheels in ruts, and though he heard the old man hailing him in his high-pitched voice, he pretended to be unconscious of it, and went on as though pursued. Presently the Pig-driver stood up in the cart and produced a sound which had in it such a note of distress that George pulled up in spite of himself, and turned his steps towards a low bit of hedge over which he might converse with his employer. He was rather surprised to find an elderly woman sitting beside Bumpett on the board which served as a driving-seat. The Pig-driver crossed his hands one over the other in spite of the reins in them and shrugged his shoulders slowly, smiling with the aspect of one who has an ample leisure in which to let loose his mind upon the world ; the horse looked round with cocked ears to see what was happening. George noticed that the woman seemed agitated.

"Now, look you, Nannie," began Bumpett cheerily, "I've a fine opinion o' this young feller. S'pose we was to ax him what he thinks."

Williams' face darkened, for he was in no humour for trifling, and he knew by long experience that the old man's expansiveness was to be met with caution. His malice was the only gratuitous thing about him, and he was liable to hand that round without stint at any moment.

"Don't you !" exclaimed Nannie, half under her breath, twitching at her companion's elbow. "Go on !" she cried to the horse, prodding it with the umbrella beside her ; the beast made a step forward, but the Pig-driver was holding the reins tightly and progress was impossible.

"It's no matter, none at all," said Nannie. "Lord love



me, I was an old foondy, brothering at you like that. Go you on, Mr. Bumpett, 'stead o' putting foolery o' that sort into the young man's head." And she grasped his sleeve again.

The Pig-driver only smiled more expansively, until his eyes were as pin-points in his face.

"How you do pug at me, Nannie, to be sure! Ah, women do take up strange notions, George, they do indeed," he said wagging his head.

"I don't know nothin' about women. I must be movin' on," answered Williams shortly.

"Well, well. Time's money wi' you," observed the Pig-driver, winking, "and there's no lack of honest work for honest men. But bide you a minute. Here's Mrs. Davies have got it that Rhys Walters is hidin' away hereabouts. What do ye say? Hey? Did 'e ever hear the like o' that now?"

"Don't mind him, young man," cried Nannie, leaning out of the cart and fixing an agonized eye on George. "Lord! Mr. Bumpett, what a man you be for your fun! 'Tis all a lie, I tell you. What do I know about Mr. Walters? He's in Ameriky by this time, and like as not he's turned into a naked savage wi' feathers hangin' down before and behind."

"Well now, George! Did 'e ever see the like o' that? Coming down the road she says to me, 'I know 'e's here,' she says; 'where is he, Mr. Bumpett?' Tell her what ye think, my lad; where be he? She won't listen to me."

For reply Williams turned his back upon the pair, and continued his way up the field. He heard the creak of the springs as the cart started on again. Nannie was almost sobbing.

"You're a wicked man, Bumpett," she said, "and if I know anything of the Lord, you'll smart for this some day."

Williams was panting by the time he had climbed up to his house, and he flung the door to unlocked behind him, for he did not want Rhys' society.



"It's open," he said, with a backward jerk of his head as the other came up.

"Did she take you?" asked Walters, disregarding the remark. He leaned against the wall, and the semi-darkness which reigned in the cottage could hardly veil the insolence in his eyes.

The other took no notice, but began to untie his neckcloth.

"Ah, you're deaf and can't hear me. I suppose you've had a punch on the head from her father. There are some men of sense in the world yet."

George made no reply, but his face lowered.

"Perhaps she didn't like you either," continued Rhys, in whom the long morning spent underground was rankling. "I'm sure I don't wonder. They like a man that can give them some sort of a decent home, to say nothing of the rest. However, there are always some thankful enough for a man's name to hide behind. You might get one that was——"

"Hold your foul tongue!" broke in Williams.

Rhys laughed. "Ha! I was right, was I? I knew well enough you'd been courting and it had come to no good. My God! Fancy a man like you trying to take up with a woman! What did you say to her, Williams? How did you begin?"

At this moment the sprig of holly fell out of George's coat. Rhys stepped forward to pick it up, and the sheep-stealer put his foot upon it, grazing Walters' finger with the nails in his boot.

"I mayn't touch it, I see. I suppose you'd like me to think she gave it you."

George was shaking with rage. The mortification in his heart was hard enough to endure without his companion's sneers, and the Pig-driver had already exasperated him. He knew that Rhys was as a man drawing a bow at a venture, but his shots were going perilously near to the mark.

"I don't care what you think," he said. "Get down the ladder, you fool!"

"Fool, am I? Fool? You can stop that. It's enough



to have to live with an oaf, let alone being called a fool by him."

"If it hadn't been for me you'd have been living somewhere pretty different—or maybe you mightn't be living at all," said Williams. Anger was beginning to lend him a tongue.

"So you're throwing that in my face! It's like you to do it. If it wasn't for Bumpett you'd be ready to turn me out into the road to take my chance. A man who's down in the world isn't fit company for you, and yet it isn't long since I wouldn't have spoken to a fellow like you, except to give orders."

"Get down-stairs," said George, controlling himself with difficulty. A man who cannot keep his temper is at the mercy of every other person who can. He knew that very well, but Rhys' persevering insults were beginning to make his blood boil.

"I'm not a dog to go to my kennel for you."

"I've seen many a dog that's better than you're ever like to be. Go down and leave me alone; I've other things to do than listen to your tongue. God! To think o' you settin' up to be above another, dog or no! I'm not thinking o' the old man in his grave down the hill there—'twas in hot blood an' never meant—but there was worse nor that, an' I know it."

Rhys' calmness was leaving him, and his nostrils dilated.

"What's to come to the girl you left? Tell me *that*!" cried the other, his voice shaking.

There was a silence, in which they eyed each other like two wild beasts.

"You'd better take her yourself," said Rhys at last with his lips drawn back from his teeth; "perhaps she mightn't look higher than a thief—now."

The words had hardly left his mouth before Williams hurled himself across the room at him with a violence which sent him staggering against the partition at his back. It gave a loud crack, and Walters feared that the whole thing might give way



and he might find himself on the ground among the ruins with the sheep-stealer on the top of him. George, whose methods of attack were primitive, had got him by the collar, and was shaking him about in a way which brought his head smartly in contact with the panels. At last his collar tore open, and, in the moment's backward slip which this caused the enemy, he wriggled sideways and got himself almost free; then he flung his arms round Williams and tried hard to get his foot in behind his heel. Nothing could be heard in the cottage but the hard-drawn breathing of the two men as they swung and swayed about, their teeth shut tight and their eyes fixed; the pent-up hatred of weeks was in them and welled up in an ecstasy of physical expression.

George was conscious only of the craving to crush his opponent, to break his ribs with the grip of his arms, to fling him like a rag into a corner with the breath wrung out of his body, but Rhys fought for one end alone, to get his man under him upon the floor, and to this object his brain worked equally with his limbs. He had always been jealous of the other's strength, and he longed and panted to see him lying prostrate below him and to taunt him with his overthrow. They were well matched, for though Williams' weight was in his favour, the other was cooler-headed, and his suppleness in shifting his position saved him from being overborne by it. His nightly ranging about the hills had given him back much of the vigour he had lost during his illness, and he was, as he had always been, like a piece of tempered steel.

Their struggles drew them nearer to the unlatched door which a little burst of wind had blown open; they felt the air on their foreheads, and it refreshed Rhys, whose breath was beginning to fail in the sheep-stealer's continued grasp. With an effort which nearly broke his back and loins he freed one arm and hit him on the temple as hard as he could, allowing for the impossibility of getting his fist far enough back for a satisfactory blow. George tried to dodge it with his head, failed, slipped up, and fell with a shock which shook the build-



ing, striking the lintel with the back of his skull. He made one convulsive effort to rise and fell back unconscious.

The young man stood looking at the great, still form with the blood oozing from underneath its hair ; then he turned cold with fear lest he should have killed a man without meaning to for the second time in his life. There was no room for triumph in his mind as he knelt down and put his hand inside Williams' shirt.

But the heart was moving, and, much reassured, he fetched the square of looking-glass which hung on the wall and held it over George's lips. His breath made a distinct fog on it, and it was evident to Rhys that he was only stunned by his fall against the woodwork of the door. With the relief, all his animosity came back, and having ventured a few steps out to take a precautionary look round, he began to drag Williams rather roughly over the threshold. This was no easy task, and it took him some time to get him round the end of the house and into the garden behind it, where he laid him on his back under the thickest gooseberry bush in a place which could not be seen from the cart-track.

There he left him while he went in to fetch the bird's-eye neck-cloth ; he dipped it in the brook as he came out, and then laid one end under the cut on the back of George's head and wound the other round his temples. After this he smoothed away all signs of their difficult progress round the cottage, covered over a few drops of blood on the ground and went in, locking the door. The air and the cold would soon revive George, and he would have to come round and beg for admittance. Meanwhile Rhys went down the ladder, meaning to keep his eye at the aperture in the wall, from which he could see his fallen enemy as he lay by the bush. He was occupying the exact spot under which he generally buried his sheep's heads ; indeed, his own was supported by the little mound which these frequent interments had raised, and Rhys smiled as he noticed it. It pleased him to see so pregnant an illustration of "the biter bit."



It did not take long for the air and the wet bandage to do their work, and Williams, who had only, to use his own phrase, "been knocked silly," soon stirred and sat up. The bleeding from the cut, which was not a deep one, relieved his head a good deal, and he gathered himself up quite unconscious of the fact that Walters' eyes were watching him not three yards away from his feet. His first impulse as he rose was to hurry down the ladder after his enemy and begin the fight afresh, but he had enough sense to realize that, with a giddiness which made walking rather difficult, he was not likely to gain by such an attempt. He leaned against the end of the cottage with a sore heart. In his eternal quarrel with life he never failed to get the worst of it, and, though he had not the morbid temperament which broods over these things, the grim undercurrent of dislike to his surroundings was always there. He ground his teeth as he thought of Rhys Walters, of Bumpett and his hateful trade, of his ill success with Mary and the rebuke he had felt so much, of the vile round of law-breaking to which he was bound for yet another year ; it was a miserable prospect. What if he were to break away from it? The thought was like a whiff from Paradise.

He could not owe the Pig-driver very much now, and the rent of the hovel he was occupying was barely worth consideration, for Bumpett would have had some difficulty in finding any one who would live in such a place. True, he had been forgiven his old debt, which amounted to nearly four pounds—an enormous sum for him. In his two years' service he must have wiped it out again and again, even taking his weekly wage into account. But, if he were free, if he could get work of any sort, he would pinch himself to the uttermost farthing till he could pay it back in consideration of his broken contract. He had no one now to think of but himself ; if he starved he would starve alone. Bumpett would, of course, be furious, but, as far as giving him up to justice was concerned, his hands would be tied. No doubt he would do his best to injure him in small ways, but that was a risk to be accepted in common



with other chances and changes of this transitory life. What if he were to do this thing—now—this moment—as he was? He drew a long breath.

A shooting pain coming from the cut on his head began to annoy him, and he went down to the brook, noticing as he passed that the door of the cottage was shut and suspecting that Rhys had locked it; he knelt down and rinsed the neck-cloth, wringing out the blood-stains till it was quite clean.

As he bent forward his head ached horribly. He washed his wound and poured the chill water over his face, which refreshed him and took away the feeling of giddiness, then he got up and stood looking at the house.

A bill-hook he had left outside was lying by the wall, and he went and picked it up; in spite of his having several small possessions inside the cottage, not for anything in the world would he have entered it, though a push or two from his shoulders would have made short work of the door.

He hoped never in all his life to see Rhys Walters again. What would become of him after he had gone, or how he would manage to live on there undetected he could not imagine and did not care. He crossed the brook and went up the hill, not wishing to go near Crishowell, and when he had passed the Pedlar's Stone and got on to the foot of the mountain, he turned westwards towards Great Masterhouse.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### MRS. WALTERS GOES TO CHAPEL

HE sat for some time on the hill-side turning things over in his mind and trying to make up some plan of action ; in his pocket was the sum of eightpence-halfpenny, which would just keep him in food for the next day or two. At present, the bare idea of eating made him feel ill, for his head had begun to ache violently after the climb. He had no hat, and he thought it would be best to rest during the day and keep his unprotected skull out of the rays of the winter sun, which were very bright. Towards evening he might find a place where he could pass the night under shelter, and to-morrow he would go to every farm for miles round—always excepting Great Masterhouse—and do what he could to get work, no matter of what sort. He might just possibly find something, and, if unsuccessful, he would betake himself to Talgarth, a small town some distance off in a different part of the country, and try his luck there ; at any rate, he had done with sheep-stealing for ever.

He found a spot under a hedge by a running stream where he sat and waited until the shades grew long. Now and then he dipped his hand and bathed his wounded head with the icy water ; in this way the day wore on until light began to fail, and he set off westward again. As he passed a small farm some dogs ran out barking, and a tidy-looking woman called them back, putting her head out of a barn-door which abutted on the path.

“Thank ye, ma’am,” said George, coming to a standstill and hesitating whether to address her further and ask for work.



She settled the question herself.

"Who be you?" she asked abruptly.

"I'm looking for work," replied he.

"I said, '*Who be you?*'" she remarked, putting her arms akimbo.

"My name's George Williams."

"And what do you want, George Williams?"

"Work."

"What sort?"

"Any sort."

"That's bad, because I haven't got none for you."

"Good-day then, ma'am," he said as he turned away.

The woman came out of the barn and stood watching him; she had never seen a tramp before who had any pretensions to good manners. He looked round and saw her, and some impulse made him go back.

"Please would ye let me lie in that barn to-night, if I may be so bold as to ask ye?"

She stared at him for a considerable time without reply. Her eyes were like gimlets.

"Do you smoke?" she inquired at last.

"No."

"Turn out your pockets."

He did so, revealing the eightpence-halfpenny, an old knife, and a piece of string.

"Very well" she said, "but see you take yourself off again to-morrow."

"I will, an' thank ye kindly."

She opened the door wide, and he saw that half of the building was full of straw; several fowls were scratching about on the floor and talking in subdued gutturals. The woman pointed to a corner.

"You can take a bit of the straw and lie there," she said, "but mind the nests." And in the misty darkness Williams was aware of the round yellow eyes of a sitting hen fixed watchfully upon him.



"I'll be mindful," he replied, wondering at his good fortune.

"You'd better stop now you're here ; it's pretty nigh dark," she observed as she shut the door and went out.

He assented gratefully, and, fetching an armful of straw, made himself a bed. The hen's eyes followed his every movement with that look of latent malice peculiar to her kind.

It was with a sense of comfort that he stretched his limbs out upon the softness ; his head ached and the darkness was very pleasant. Presently the door beside him opened and the woman's hand appeared with a large round of bread and a piece of cheese in it ; she gave it to him with an abrupt nod and departed, noisily slamming the latch. He had no appetite, but he put the gifts by carefully with a view to the morrow and was soon asleep.

He was up by daylight and off again on his search. He passed Great Masterhouse, and, at mid-day, had been to every place where it was possible that labour was employed. But there was no chance for him anywhere, it seemed, and he was much disheartened as he sat down to eat the bread and cheese he had been given ; he determined to go straight on to Talgarth.

In the afternoon he struck into a lane leading down to the valley and on to his destination ; he was getting rather weary, having been on his legs since before sunrise, and he was sick at heart from perpetual rebuffs and disappointments. He came all at once upon a hollow circular place whose green turf surrounded a building which he took to be a place of worship of some kind. It was not an attractive spot, and, though the door was open, there appeared to be no one in the neighbourhood. A wall, not two feet high, enclosed the chapel ; he strode over this, glad to think that there would be something to sit upon inside after his long trudge. When he had entered he was a good deal alarmed to find that there were one or two people occupying the wooden pews, and that a man in black was seated upon a raised platform with a book in front of him. He would



have turned and fled, but the eyes of the man were upon him, and, in face of this, he lost courage and went in as quietly as he could, taking an obscure seat in a dark place beside the door. A little window was just by his head, and he could see, without standing up, that the congregation was beginning to arrive in twos and threes. Nearly every one went over the wall as he had done, men and women alike. The man in black returned to his reading and he felt more comfortable.

As a sound of wheels approached he looked out and saw through the distortion of the ancient window-panes that a gig containing two women had drawn up upon the grass, and that a boy whom he had not noticed had risen mysteriously from a bush and taken hold of the horse's head. The two were dressed much alike in bonnets and shawls, but it was evident that they were mistress and servant from the way in which the driver threw down the reins and helped the other deferentially to the ground. She also went forward and had a struggle with the rusty wicket while her companion awaited the result ; it was plain that the ordinary method of approach over the wall was not good enough for the superior personality whom she served. George was rather interested, and would have been more so had he known that he was looking at Mrs. Walters and her servant Nannie.

As the new-comers entered the chapel they passed within a few feet of the young man in his corner, and he had a vague sense of having seen the taller woman before, though he did not recognize the other as the person who had been in Bumpett's cart on the previous day, her face being turned from him. There was a perceptible movement of heads towards Mrs. Walters as she went up to her place, and she took a prominent seat with the dignified air of one who knew that no less was expected of her. Nannie sat a little way behind that she might examine the other chapel-goers without the rebuke of her mistress' eye ; she had come under protest, it being far more abhorrent to her to go to chapel on a week-day than to stay away from it on a Sunday. But it was a special occasion, for



the man in black—none other than the preacher who had originally “brought truth” to Mrs. Walters—was leaving the neighbourhood on the following morning and did not expect to return to his flock for some months ; and her mistress’ orders admitted of no question.

In a short time the chapel had half filled, and the service began with a reading from the Old Testament, and a dissertation of immense length upon the chapter read. It seemed interminable to Williams, as he sat quietly in his place, glad of the rest and giving but little attention to what was going on. He was so much absorbed by his own difficulties and humiliations that when the assembly, led by a strange voice which seemed to come from somewhere behind the man in black, began to sing a metrical psalm, his mind leaped back to his surroundings with a start. When the singing was over, all fell reverently on their knees and prayed, following the extemporaneous supplications of the preacher in silence. George knelt too. He did not pray, but the change of attitude was pleasant ; he rested his head on his arms and closed his eyes, for the voice made him drowsy, and, unheeded by any one, he slid out of consciousness into sleep.

After the prayers came another reading of the Bible, but he slept on. His head, bowed on his arms, had a devout look which made those who could see him suppose him a fervent worshipper unable to bring himself down from the exaltation of prayer ; but the congregation was one accustomed to unconventional things taking place in chapel and paid no heed. Only a few, as they trooped from the building, cast curious glances at him, wondering what sudden conversion or tardy repentance was going on under the window.

Nannie Davies had bustled out among the first, and was calling loudly from the very door of the sanctuary to the boy to put in the horse ; she had a strident voice, and crooked her forefinger as she beckoned him from his lair in the bushes with a gesture only known to the lower orders.

Mrs. Walters was the last to remain. The man in black



came down from his platform and stood talking to her for some time with his back to the departing people. At last they shook hands, and the black silk skirt was rustling towards the entrance when she caught sight of the sleeping man.

She paused in front of him, but he did not move. The window above his head shone straight in her eyes, making his figure seem dim ; she did not doubt any more than did the rest of the worshippers that he was praying devoutly, and, as she had only just turned in his direction, she had no idea how long he had remained in that attitude. She suspected some spiritual conflict, and, like Saint Paul, would fain proclaim the Gospel in season and out of season. She touched him on the shoulder.

"You are very earnest in prayer, young man," she said solemnly. "May the words of Grace we have heard sink into your heart."

An overpowering confusion covered George. "I wasn't praying, ma'am ; I was asleep," he stammered as he rose.

"Sleeping in this holy place? In the very sound of the Word? Shame on you! Shame on you indeed!"

"I couldn't help it. I didn't mean——"

"Come with me outside," said Mrs. Walters. "Let us not forget that we are standing in the tabernacle of the Lord."

She went out in front of him and he followed. Embarrassed as he was, he could not help being impressed, and, like Nannie, he felt that he had met with a person to be obeyed, though his idea was the result of instinct and hers of experience.

As they stood in the afternoon light she looked rather severely at his untidy dress ; though he had put on the best clothes he possessed to go and see Mary, he had since trudged in them for the greater part of two days and slept in them on the preceding night. His unhandsome aspect did not speak well for him.

"Do you not remember Eutychus, the youth who slept while Saint Paul was preaching?" she continued. "He fell from the window where he sat, and would have perished in his sins but



for the apostle of the Gentiles. The sin of irreverence is great. Remember you may perish in it."

He stood silent. The people had all departed and the place was deserted. Only Nannie waited by the horse's head, impatiently watching her mistress.

"Why did you come here if you had no heart to pray?" inquired Mrs. Walters.

"I was tired, ma'am—cruel done. The door was open and I thought I could sit down quiet-like. I'd no notion there was preaching to be."

"Where have you come from? Where are you going to?"

"It's work I'm after. I've gone high and low, and up an' down, and I can't get none. There's nothin' I'd turn from if I could get enough to keep me from starving." His voice almost shook.

"What can you do?" she asked, being a practical woman.

"I can turn my hand to a power of things about a farm. And I'm a proper fine hedge-and-ditcher," he added simply.

In every accident of daily life Mrs. Walters was inclined to see a special working of Providence, and it was in her mind that this man, so strangely encountered, might be a brand to be plucked from the burning and reserved for her hand. She began to think deeply, and, as Williams saw it, he fixed his eager eyes on her face. Help from this stern woman seemed to be a futile hope, but he clung to it.

"Do you know how to grow vegetables?" she said at last.

"No, I don't. Nothin' but potatoes, more's the pity."

"But you might learn."

"I'd try hard, ma'am. Be sure o' that. But I can't tell how 'twould do."

Mrs. Walters prided herself on her accurate reading of people, and, to do her justice, she was generally aware of the sufficiently obvious.

"I think you are honest," she said, looking hard at him.

Poor George thought of many things and became crimson. She noticed his extreme confusion.



"Perhaps you have not always been so," she observed.

"No, I've not," he replied, looking down at his boots.

"Man! man!" she cried suddenly, her eyes lighting up. "Repent, repent, while yet you may! The day of grace has not gone by! Turn from your sins! Abhor them! Flee from them! Put behind you the evil and strive after a new life." She raised her hands as she spoke, and her voice rang over to where Nannie stood by the cart.

This outburst of exhortation had the effect of making Williams very shy. Intensely reserved himself, it was a real shock to him to see a stranger so entirely carried away by feeling; he did not know where to look, and could only stare at a little tuft of moss growing in the wall of the chapel. His face appeared almost sullen. He could see that her lips were moving, and that she passed her handkerchief once or twice over her face. Presently her calm returned.

"Do you wish to lead an honest life?" she asked.

"I do indeed; Gospel truth I do."

"You are a strong man and ought to do a good day's work. Will you do it, if I give it you?"

"None shall do a better than I."

"Then I will try you. You must come to me to-morrow at mid-day, and I will speak to you. You do not know who I am, I suppose?" she inquired as an after-thought.

"No, ma'am, I don't indeed."

"I am Mrs. Walters of Great Masterhouse," she replied with a certain stiffness. Her position as a rich woman, the isolation she had made for herself, and the interested looks which followed her whenever she went abroad were not without their charm for her, for, like many who take the effacing of themselves very seriously, she had a touch of what might be called inverted vanity.

The familiarity of her face now explained itself to George, and he had a strong feeling of repulsion at the thought of working among everything which had belonged to Rhys. But a man struggling for his daily bread can take no account of



such imaginings, and he knew that he ought to be sincerely thankful for what had happened.

She went down the path to her cart, cutting short his thanks, and he turned to enter the chapel again. She looked round and called him.

"Why do you go back?" she inquired, with a faint hope that her words had moved him to pray, possibly to give thanks for the prospects she held out.

"I have left my bill-hook, ma'am. 'Tis lying on the ground in the bottom o' the seat."

A slight expression of annoyance was on her face as the maid-servant helped her up to her place and brushed her dress where the wheel had rubbed it. Nannie was a clumsy driver, if a safe one, and she turned the horse round in an immense circle on the short grass. As George came out he saw the cart disappearing up the lane, the two women's backs shaking as the wheels ran into sudden hollows, mistress' and maid's alike.



## CHAPTER XIX

### THE MOTH AND THE CANDLE

THE Archæological Society which reckoned the border country by the Black Mountain as its special hunting-ground met every winter or early spring ; it had two places of assemblage, and those it took in turn, meeting one year at Llangarth, and the next at an insignificant township about twenty miles off across the further bank of the Wye.

When the latter place was the base of operations for the enthusiasts, it had been for ages the custom of Mr. Fenton and his wife to invite the Vicar of Crishowell to Waterchurch, so that host and guest might attend the meeting together. Both men were members of the association, and the rendezvous was within comfortable driving distance. The Squire, it is true, had only a lukewarm interest to give to antiquities, but the Vicar, whose mind had a secret strain of romance, had thrown himself heart and soul into the fascinating subject, and contributed some of the most interesting papers the society possessed.

Lady Harriet Fenton and her husband were in what the servants called "her ladyship's boodore," a cheerful apartment, where, as a matter of fact, most of the business of the Waterchurch estate was done, and Mr. Fenton stood on the hearthrug looking at his wife's back, talking, as he talked nearly every day, of agricultural and money dilemmas and their solutions. He spoke sensibly enough, but the solutions had a way of being postponed until later, when he had gone off to look round the stables and Lady Harriet could settle down to her usual morning's work.



The Squire was one of those happy and consistent people who have one real vocation in life, and follow it with no deviations. He was a figure-head. His fine features, height, and the gallant bearing he had kept until well on into late middle age, singled him out from those less ornamented by nature, and the excellent sense of his conversation impressed all those with whom he was thrown. Devoted to field sports, he was popular in the hunting-field ; an excellent shot, an ideal companion. Such was the universal verdict. And, in spite of the fact that he was a figure-head, his wife had also found him an ideal companion, or very nearly so, partly because he was less exacting than persons of this profession generally are, and partly because she herself had one of those natures to whom idleness means misery. He talked and was pleasant, and she worked and was indispensable, and between them they kept things going. If sometimes her shoulders ached and she longed for a rest, she kept these things to herself, and no one but Llewellyn suspected them ; for her endurance was great, as great as the loyalty which had held up the figure-head for twenty-five odd years to the gaze of an admiring world. She managed all business except the few little things that it amused him to undertake himself, and he leaned upon her, liked her better than any one he knew, and occasionally had fleeting suspicions that she was superior to most women, though other matters generally intervened in his mind and forbade him to follow out the idea.

Lady Harriet was the daughter of a well-known sporting peer, and it was her horsemanship which had first attracted him, combined with the knowledge that she had a little money. She had never possessed beauty of any sort, being a woman of short and almost stumpy figure, with strong hands and square shoulders ; what had alone redeemed her from absolute ugliness were her masses of dark hair and the sympathy of expression in her eyes, which could be appealing, steadfast, humorous, or soft. Years had intensified this grace in her ; it was a lasting one, and had endured while the thick hair had become silver-



grey. She had always been a keen lover of outdoor life and sports, and had hunted regularly with her husband and sons, until the Squire's straitened means had made it difficult to mount the whole family; then she had quietly given her hunting up, saying that she was getting too old for long days.

In the minds of her sons she was connected with everything they had liked best in their childhood. Their father had not been disposed to trouble himself with youngsters, so she had taken them bird's-nesting, scrambling, fishing, and had taught them all as little boys to ride to hounds. She had not gone much into society of late years, having no daughters to take out, and not conceiving it to be her duty to form one of a row of gossiping dowagers at county balls. In her secret heart Llewellyn was the dearest to her of her four boys; he was the youngest child, and there was a likeness in disposition between them which, had they been of one sex, would have forced them apart, but which, as they were mother and son, drew them together. Besides, as his business kept him at home, he knew her far more intimately than did his brothers, and with that greater impartiality which comes when the boy grows into the man and meets his parents more on common ground.

"Do you know that the Archæological Society meets next week, and that we must ask Mr. Lewis to come over?" inquired Lady Harriet, looking out of the window upon a border of snowdrops which were just coming up.

"By Jove, yes; I had forgotten," exclaimed Mr. Fenton. "I suppose we ought to ask the niece too."

"I did not know he had one."

"A very pretty one. I saw her dancing with Harry at the yeomanry ball. I forget her name; somebody told me something about her, but I can't remember that either."

His wife looked thoughtful. "We shall have to ask her at any rate," she said; "she can't be left out very well. I hope she is nice."

"You had better write at once, my dear," said the Squire, making for the door. "I am going off to the stables."



So Lady Harriet wrote.

The letter, when it arrived at Crishowell, produced the most lively effect upon Isoline. First a perfect agony of apprehension that her uncle should refuse—a thing that he had no thought of doing—then, a secret hope that Harry had been the originator of the plan, and had persuaded his parents to send the invitation ; and finally, a mental trying-on of every frock in her wardrobe to decide the momentous question of which should be chosen for the coming visit. This imaginary review was followed by a real one, even more interesting.

She had not been altogether dull at Crishowell of late, for her meeting with the person whom she thought of as Robert Kent had been the first of several. The Vicar, who spent his afternoons in reading while daylight lasted, only went out just before dusk, and as his visits to distant cottages brought him home generally at a very late hour, she had ample time to take off her outdoor clothes and install herself by the fire before his return. For a few days after meeting Rhys Walters she had hesitated whether to go in the direction of the Pedlar's Stone again, but the prospect of being appreciated and the want of something to do had been too much for her, and she set out one evening for the farm which Rhys had indicated, and found her way there by short cuts pointed out by those whom she met in the lanes. Taken that way, the distance was not great, and when she set foot upon the short turf of the plateau she was surprised at feeling so little tired, and walked on westwards. The desertedness of the place awed her a little, and once or twice she was on the verge of fleeing homewards, but a figure loomed out of the dusk as she had hoped it might, and her fears vanished under the protection of her new admirer.

Rhys was very respectful to her, a wholesome fear having filled his mind that his rather bold remarks had prevented her from returning, but he had haunted the place of their meeting patiently, and had reaped the reward of it in seeing her timid approach through the failing light. This had happened two or three times.



she thought, as she began to unpack her box and to lay out her dresses.

As she stood before the looking-glass ready for dinner she made a radiant picture against the vague darkness which the sunken fire had almost ceased to illumine. The wax candles on either side of her reflection lit her up, a vision of youth framed in by the large oval of the mirror. She had put on a low white muslin dress with transparent folds surrounding the shoulders, in which she looked like some beautiful woodland sprite rising from a film of thistledown. A string of scarlet coral was round her neck, matching her red lips. She looked at herself intently, and her eyes seemed to be dreaming a dream of her own beauty. Presently she took a scarlet geranium, which stood in a little glass on the table with a piece of maidenhair, and fastened it on her bosom; then she turned away, looking back at herself over her shoulder. Dinner would not be ready for twenty minutes, and she wondered what she could do until it was time to go down. It was so dark out of the radius of the candles, and the lugubriousness of a piece of tapestry let into the panelling and representing an armed warrior in the act of cutting off an enemy's head made her shiver; she determined to have a roaring fire when bed-time came. Then she thought she would go down to the drawing-room; it would be lighter there, and she might amuse herself by looking at the things in it until the rest of the world was dressed.

The strangeness of the house made her feel shy, and she went down-stairs softly, meeting no one, and entered the drawing-room to find Harry standing at the window whistling softly as he stared out into the dark. Though the curtains were not drawn he could not have got much profit from his observations, for all outside was an indistinguishable mass of black. His face lit up as he turned and saw her.

"I hoped you might be early," he said. "I dressed as quickly as I could on the chance of your coming down soon."



"What made you think I should?" she asked, lowering her eyelids.

"You went up so long ago. You can't take more than an hour dressing, surely?"

"Oh, but one can if one wants to look nice."

"You have done that to-night, at any rate," said he.

"You are very complimentary, Mr. Fenton."

"It's quite true," replied he, with fervour, cursing inwardly as he heard a footstep nearing the door.

It was only a servant come to draw the curtains, and the two sat in rather a conscious silence while the shutters were fastened up and the heavy rings sent rattling along the curtain-poles.

"Are you coming to Crishowell again?" asked Isoline, when the servant had gone.

"I should like to come every day if I could," he replied.

He was falling very deeply in love; never had she looked so beautiful to him, and seeing her in his own familiar surroundings added to his infatuation. To keep her there always would be to locate heaven.

"Why do you say 'if I could'? Cannot you do as you please?" she inquired, with a pout.

"Of course I can," he said rather stiffly, thinking of Llewellyn. "Who is to prevent me? I shall come next week."

She smiled archly. "On business for your father?" said she, playing with the geranium in her bodice.

"No; on business of my own."

As Isoline sailed in to dinner on the arm of Mr. Fenton, she wished heartily that her aunt in Hereford could have seen her, and she took her place with a little air of deprecating languor; she was anxious to impress the servants with the fact that she had been waited on all her life, and that no genteel experience could be anything but stale. Afterwards, when dinner was over and she retired with Lady Harriet to the drawing-room, she felt herself for the first time unequal to the



occasion, though she chatted away, helped by the elder woman's efforts to put her at her ease. But both stifled a sigh of relief when the men came in.

It was a dull, solemn evening, she thought, though she enjoyed the rapture with which Harry turned over the leaves of her music as she sang. Her clear, thin voice sounded like a bird's when she trilled her little operatic airs ; it was true, too, which is more than can be said for many one has to listen to in drawing-rooms.

She got into the impressive four-poster in her panelled room, sighing to think that one of her evenings at Waterchurch was over, though, as far as actual enjoyment went, it had not been remarkable. But we follow ideas, not actualities—at least, those of us who have souls above the common.

She soon fell asleep, tired by the excitement of seeing new faces, and well satisfied with herself ; but Harry sat up late in his room. It was long past midnight when he went to bed, and, when he did, he could not sleep for thinking of her.



## CHAPTER XX

### THE PEDLAR'S STONE

THE Vicarage at Crishowell looked duller than ever, Isoline thought, as she and Mr. Lewis came round the corner of the church and faced its homely front. Howlie was at the door grinning affably, in her eyes a horrible travesty of the soft-mannered footman who had presided over their departure at the other end of their drive. A duck was quacking by the pond, and she would have liked to throw stones at the creature for the odious familiarity of its greeting, had she only known how to do so. She knew herself to be built for refinement, and, after two days of a ladyship's society, it could hardly be expected of her to slip glibly into lower surroundings. Her face grew haughty as she perceived Howlie.

The visit to Waterchurch had, perhaps, lacked something of the grandeur expected, and the discrepancy between her anticipations of Lady Harriet and the real woman were a little upsetting; but there had been compensations, for she suspected herself of having, in some ways, impressed her hostess. A woman who went out in a homespun skirt and thick boots could not fail to notice the difference between herself and a young lady who wore beflounced dresses and kid shoes even in the country.

She had now no doubt of Harry's feelings; he was deeply in love with her, and she looked to his coming visit as to a red-letter day. He would arrive next week "on his own business," as he had said, and his business would be hers too. She was quite shrewd enough to foresee opposition on the



part of his family, but the game was worth the candle, and would be hers in the end. It was stimulating to think of a victory over Lady Harriet.

Howlie and the maid-servant carried her box to her room, the former puffing loudly as he went up the staircase supporting the hinder end of the load.

"Unlock it," said Isoline, as it was set down in its place, tossing him her keys with the air of a duchess.

He looked as impudently at her as he dared, and picking up the bunch, proceeded to make as much noise as he possibly could over the operation.

"How dreadfully clumsy you are, Howell," she exclaimed, annoyed, very naturally, by the superfluous rattling that was going on.

He only sniffed, a habit he had when he found reply unnecessary.

The rattling did not abate, till she darted across the room to snatch the keys from him, the hauteur of her deportment flying to the winds.

"You stupid boy!" she exclaimed, "if you were at Waterchurch Court, where I have been, you would not be tolerated for a single day! Her ladyship would send you packing in a very short time!"

He fixed his gaze upon her critically, and observed that, in taking off her hat, she had loosened some hairpins.

"Yewre 'air's coming down," he remarked placidly.

Her hand went up to it at once.

"Oi can settle that for yew," he continued, with pleasant good-nature, "for oi learned to plat up the 'orses' tails proper when I was working i' the yard at Jones'."

"You are impertinent as well as noisy," said Miss Ridgeway angrily; "if you cannot unlock my box you had better go down-stairs. Why Mr. Lewis keeps you here at all is a wonder to me, mannerless, good-for-nothing boy that you are!"

He gathered himself up from the floor on which he was kneeling by the box, and left the room. Isoline was still



ruffled when she turned to her dressing-table, but Howlie was smiling as he made his way to the back premises. "Miss is crewell hoigh since she come back from Fenton's," he remarked to the maid-servant as he entered the kitchen. "She's a settin' her cap at the young general over there. Moy! but he's a smart feller too," he added, thinking of the half-crown.

For a couple of days after her return the memory of Waterchurch buoyed up Isoline through the flatness of life at the Vicarage, and she spent many an hour anticipating Harry's coming and its almost certain result. But, in spite of this, time was long, and the excitement in her mind made her restless, too restless to sit quietly in the house; she felt she must be out and moving about—a rather unusual thing with her.

It was with a half-formed resolution that she put on her hat one afternoon, the Pedlar's Stone in her mind. Harry was so much in her thoughts that she was a little unwilling to replace his visionary image by the reality of the person she was likely to find there, but, in spite of this, her feet seemed to carry her imperceptibly towards the way that had become so familiar. She found herself on the turf of the plateau almost before she had decided whether it would be pleasant to see Rhys or not.

She was pretty certain that he would be waiting there, for, though he had made no actual declaration of love to her, she had seen plainly at their last meeting that he was on the high-road to doing so. Comparing him with Harry in her mind, she knew that he was the more attractive of the two, partly because of the mystery surrounding him, and partly because, as a man, he was a more imposing person. Harry was a boy. But what Harry lacked in personal importance was made up to him a thousandfold by his accessories; the actual man mattered little to her. She had hardly discovered more about Rhys than he had told her on the evening of their first meeting, for though she had tried to question him about himself



on subsequent occasions, she had got at nothing new. To-night she resolved to find out something further.

Dusk had fallen when she reached the Pedlar's Stone; she knew nothing of its history nor the reason of its existence, and her curiosity about outdoor things was so small, that it had never occurred to her to ask him about it. She stood beside it looking round at the darkening landscape, never suspecting that, apart from the Pig-driver and a few of his dependents, she was almost the only person in Crishowell parish who would venture to do so. Had she known it, the idea would hardly have troubled her, for though not physically brave, she was too unimaginative to be upset by anything she could neither see nor feel. She stepped up on to the bank in which it was embedded, and looked through the straggling hazels for some sign of Rhys. Not a live thing was to be seen. She shuddered a little at the awful loneliness that hung around, and for a moment a kind of panic took her. It was almost as though the atmosphere of horror raised round the place by popular tradition had made itself tangible and leaped upon her. She turned quickly to come down the bank, screaming at the sudden apparition of Rhys' figure. He stood a few paces off, with his arms folded, watching her.

"How you startled me!" she exclaimed, half angry; "where did you come from?"

"I have followed you for some way," he replied, smiling as he took her hand.

"I don't like that," she said pettishly; "it is horrid to think of some one walking behind one when one does not suspect it."

"Are you angry with me?" asked Rhys. "Don't be unkind after I've waited for you every evening for the last four days."

"But I told you I should be away from Crishowell. I only came back the day before yesterday. I enjoyed myself very much too."

"I am glad of that," said Rhys, in a voice which gave the lie to his words.



"I was staying at such a delightful place," she continued, pausing for the expected question.

It came at once.

"Where was that?"

"A place called Waterchurch Court. Have you ever heard of it? It belongs to Mr. Fenton, who is very rich."

Rhys repressed an exclamation. "I know about him. He has a son, hasn't he?"

"Yes," replied Isoline, looking conscious.

"An' I'll be bound he paid you a sight of attention," cried Walters, relapsing, as he sometimes did when excited, into the speech of his forefathers.

"Let us go and sit down," said Isoline, "I am getting tired." She moved towards the great stone on which they usually sat.

"You haven't answered me," he exclaimed, tormented by the thought of Harry.

Isoline liked power. "Why should I?" she asked lightly.

"I'll tell you why," he cried, his breath coming short through his hot lips; "because I love you, Isoline—I love you! I love you! I think of nothing but you, day and night!"

She quickened her pace, her head turned away from him, yet her expression was not exactly one of displeasure. But he could not see that.

"Ah, you don't care, I suppose," he went on, catching her hand again, "but you can't stop me, Isoline. Do you hear that? I love you! I *will* love you, whatever you may say. What do I care for anything in this world but you? Here I've sat, night after night, crying out in my heart for you, and longing all the days you have been away for a sight of your face! Hate me if you like, I can't stop loving you."

"Let me alone, Mr. Kent," faltered the girl, somewhat taken off her feet by his torrent of words. "Let me go, please; I cannot stay here if you go on in that way."

"You *shall* hear me!" cried Walters, planting himself before her. "Why did you come here, making me forget everything, luck and trouble alike? Isoline! Isoline!"



She was getting alarmed by his violence, and would have turned and fled, but his arms were round her and he was covering her face, her lips, her cheek, her hair, with furious kisses. She struggled angrily for a moment, and finding resistance useless, dropped her head upon his shoulder and began to cry. Rhys held her closer.

"Don't cry like that," he said, almost in a whisper, frightened in his turn by the effect of his outburst.

"Let me go," she repeated. "I want to go home."

"Isoline, don't say that—don't go! Ah! how I love you! You must not go. Speak to me—tell me you like me a little, only to keep me from breaking my heart."

"Let me go," she repeated again.

He loosed his arms and she pushed him away. "How can you be so rough and frighten me so?" she exclaimed, drying her eyes with her handkerchief. "I will never come back here—never—never!"

Rhys was half-mad with excitement and despair at her words. He turned away, striking his clenched hands together and walking to and fro like a creature in a cage. She watched him over her handkerchief; emotion was a thing new to her, and she did not like it.

"Do stop," she said petulantly, putting it back in her pocket. He turned round and stood humbly before her.

"I have terrified you," he said. "I am a brute beast, not fit to speak to you, not fit to love you."

Almost for the first time in his life he thought more of another than of himself. She was silent, the resentment in her face giving way to curiosity.

"Why do you behave like that?" she asked at last.

"Oh, Isoline, I am sorry. Only stay with me a little longer. I swear to you that I will be quiet, and not frighten you any more. I couldn't help it, dear; I love you so."

"I think you have behaved very badly," the girl said, pursing up her lips and quite self-possessed again. "It is impossible for me to stay. I am accustomed to gentlemen."



Rhys groaned.

"I hope you are ashamed," she said, with a fine ignorance of her own share in the situation.

"I am, I am."

He stood silent while she smoothed her hair, which had become disarranged.

"I suppose I may go a bit of the way with you," he hazarded, when she had finished. "It's dark, and I must see you as far as the place above the farm."

She did not move; she was looking at him with a faint curiosity.

"I will stay a short time if you give me your word that you will not annoy me again," she said, a little surprised at his submission.

Certainly it was a strange state of mind for such a man as Rhys Walters. But many things had cropped up in his heart, unsuspected even by himself.

"I don't deserve it," he said.

"I do not wish to be too hard upon you," she replied, judicially, as she seated herself in their usual place.

Rhys' depression was so great that Isoline soon began to get rather tired of his company, for he seemed quite incapable of entertaining her, and the little admiring speeches that had formerly fallen so glibly from his tongue would not come, charmed she never so wisely.

In a short time she rose to go home, and he made no protest after he had extorted a reluctant promise that she would return again. Her reluctance did not go very deep.

"Why have you told me so little about yourself?" she asked, as they went along the plateau. "I know your name, and I know that I must not speak of you to any one; but that is not much."

He was not embarrassed by these questions, for he had long ago foreseen them and prepared something to meet them with.

"What are you doing here?" continued she. "Does no one ever see you?"



"No one but you and one other. If I were seen I should have to leave this place at once. I am a Government agent on private business for the Crown."

He paused a moment, and Isoline's eyes opened wide in her interest.

"Yes," she said, "go on."

"I'm employed by Government to watch some people who are thought to be doing wrong, and to do that, I have to keep myself out of sight."

"Who are they, and what are they doing?"

"I can't tell any one that, but it has to do with an estate."

The girl drank his words in. The little imagination she had was always attracted by a mystery, and the very vagueness of his story only served to impress her more.

"Then is Kent your real name?" she asked.

"No—no, it isn't. But I have had to take it for business purposes. You haven't forgotten that you promised to tell no one you had seen me. You will keep your word, Isoline?"

"Oh, certainly," she exclaimed fervently, "I should be afraid to say anything after what you have told me. I might get into trouble, mightn't I?" she added naively.

"And I might have to go to prison," he said, speaking the exact truth. "You would be sorry for that, wouldn't you, Isoline?"

"Oh, really I should. How dreadful!" she exclaimed.

At this his heart thrilled; he had no idea how the words "Crown" and "Government" had exalted him in her eyes. The pedestal upon which he had raised her was so high that he never supposed she could see down into the sordid world beneath her. Poor Rhys! the spiritual part of him was small, a feeble spark hidden deep in the darkness of selfishness, but Isoline had struck it with her little worthless hand, and it had flickered up.

After leaving her he went back to the cottage in a state of rapture, for she had promised to return. Like Harry at Waterchurch, he was wakeful with thoughts of her, but, unlike him,



he went out into the night, and spent it rambling among the shoulders of the mountain.

It was dawning when he came home and locked himself in for the coming day, and the place was so cheerless that he almost missed George. He wondered what had become of him as he went down the ladder and threw himself on his bed. The underground room was now half filled with things which he had carried below after his companion had left him, and the mattress and other possessions belonging to the sheep-stealer furnished his prison, and made it a little more habitable. The impossibility of having a fire tried him in the cold weather, for the place was chilly with the damp of the surrounding earth, and he dared not during the day kindle the smallest flame in the fire-place, for fear that, by some fraction of a chance, some one might pass, and observe the uncommon spectacle of smoke issuing from an empty house.

For some days after Williams had gone he had been in sore straits. There were few provisions in the cottage, and when they were finished, there was no means of getting more, as he dared not venture out. Fortunately, it wanted but a few days of the Pig-driver's weekly visit, and he eked out his food till the old man should arrive, fighting his hunger as best he might, and blessing the clear mountain water which ran at the door. As he heard the sound of Bumpett's squeaky voice one morning in the room above, he felt like a shipwrecked man who sees a sail. Had his visitor been an angel from heaven, instead of an exceedingly wicked old man, he could not have been more welcome.



## CHAPTER XXI

### THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSOR

WHEN the Pig-driver heard from Rhys that George had gone, apparently for good and all, his rage was great ; his tight little lips had only one movement with which to express anything he felt, and they grew yet tighter in a grin as he sat on a log in the underground room and heard the story. His mouth had the appearance of being embedded in his round face. He was angry with Walters for his part in ridding him of such a servant as he could hardly hope to replace, but he did not venture to give his anger the rein, being too much aware of the loneliness of their position. He was a cautious man, and contented himself with laughing immoderately as Rhys told him of his privations, and making some very unseasonable jokes.

"How we do come down i' the world," he said sympathetically, taking off his hat and turning it critically round in his hands. "Well, well, to be sure, who would a' thought, when ye were such a fine figger of a feller at Great Masterhouse, that ye'd come to this?" His eyes twinkled as he spread out his fingers on his knees.

"Little did I think," he continued, "when I were settin' down to the fire last night wi' my drop o' cider an' my bit o' cold goose, that you was starvin' here like a beggar man, an' would be thankful to me for any crust o' bread I could spare ye."

It was rather a surprise to Bumpett when he saw how willing Rhys Walters was to remain in George's place, and to do George's work. He proposed the scheme with considerable



caution, expecting an indignant refusal, but the other took it quietly enough, and agreed to serve him as George had done, and to receive his daily food in return and the use of the miserable roof under which they sat.

"Ye bean't thinking to leave the country then?" said the Pig-driver with some curiosity.

"Not yet," said Rhys curtly, reddening as he spoke.

The old man looked shrewdly at him out of his pig-eyes.

"Ye've got some game o' your own, I'll be bound," he said, with one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder. "Well, it's nowt to do wi' me, though I am your master now," he added, as he disappeared safely through the trap-door.

Rhys now cared neither how he existed nor what he did so long as he could see Isoline Ridgeway, and time, for him, was measured merely by the interval between one meeting and another. He snatched at Bumpett's proposal, which would open the road to all he lived for and give him an occupation he liked. He had grown perfectly reckless, looking no farther than the actual present; his old identity, his old interests and possessions were lost, and no new life, however prosperous, could make up to him for a final parting with Isoline. He was like a man upon whom the sun bursts from behind some dismal pack of clouds, dazzling his eyes, heart, brain and imagination till he can no longer clearly see the objects around. He was blinded, overpowered; his self-important soul was humbled by the perfections with which he had invested his queen.

His very face had altered since the days before the Rebecca riots, for the clear tan of his skin was changed to a sort of pallor due to his indoor life. His roamings in the dusk and during the dark hours of night kept him in health, and his limbs had long ago recovered their strength, but he no longer wore the expression of self-centred carelessness which had characterized him a few months before. His keen eyes had a look of pre-occupation, the look of a man whose soul inhabits one place while his body lives in another. All his life his



adaptability had been so great that, from every new change and experience, he had gathered some surface difference. Now, for the first time, a thing had happened which had gone down deep and reached the real man. It could not change him altogether, but it had raised the best flower which had ever sprung up from the poor and untilled ground of his nature.

James Bumpett was scarcely the man to let a debtor slip through his fingers as George had done, and he cast about on every hand to find out what had become of the truant. Williams, who was working among the cabbage-beds of the garden at Great Masterhouse, glanced over the fence one day to see the rubicund face and tall hat of the Pig-driver on the other side of it. The two men looked at each other, and Bumpett's mouth made itself into a slit; he was so small that he could only just see over the high green boards.

"Well, to be sure!" he exclaimed, chuckling. "Well, well, I never did!"

The other met his eyes with a sullen calmness. "I've left you," he said.

"Name o' goodness! Have ye, now? Well, ye might say I suspected it."

The old man came nearer to the fence, and, taking hold of the pointed boards of the top, drew himself up, till his hat had risen about a foot over it. Dignity was one of the few things he did not understand.

"Mind yourself; there's nails," said George.

"I suppose," remarked Bumpett, "that ye thought ye'd seen the last o' me."

Williams resumed his work, and went on turning over the earth which he was preparing for vegetable seeds. He determined to take no more notice of the Pig-driver, who had found in the fence a suitable cranny in which to insert his foot, and showed no signs of departure. His horse and cart were standing a little way off.

"There's a sight o' sludge in that garden," he remarked at last, smiling agreeably.



Many excelled George in speech, but silence was rather a gift of his. His spade went on vigorously. Bumpett began to hum as he looked at the bare branches of the pear-tree trained against one end of the farm wall.

"Don't you be afeard to speak up, George Williams," he said reassuringly, when he had finished his tune.

It was a chilly morning, and the wind which swept over the plateau to Great Masterhouse was beginning to touch up the old man's hands in a disagreeable way; his knuckles looked blue as he grasped the fence. The thud of the spade going into the earth was the only response.

"Ye'll have something to say when I take the law on ye for that rent-money," he called out as he slipped down to the ground and climbed into his cart.

Mrs. Walters soon discovered that, in doing well for Williams, she had also done well for herself. Her new servant worked harder than any one on the farm, and was so quiet and orderly that he gave trouble to neither mistress nor men. Although she despised flowers for mere ornament's sake, she had some practical knowledge of gardening as far as the useful part of it went, and, her father having been a seedsman, she was learned in planting and the treatment of parsley and carrots and everything that contributed to the household table. Under her management George worked in the garden; he mended gates and fences, pumped water, and turned his hand to anything. She exacted from him a promise to go to chapel every Sunday, and looked upon him with that proprietary feeling that a man may have for a dog which he has personally saved from drowning. Sometimes she spoke to him of his soul, which abashed him terribly.

Although she wore a black silk dress on Sundays, as befitted a woman of her means, she was up and out early on week-days, walking through cow-house and poultry-yard, and appearing now and then in places in which she was not expected, to the great confusion of the idle.

She was just to her men, and, according to her lights, just to



her maids. To the latter she was pitiless on the discovery that any one of them had so much as the ghost of a love-affair. Such things were intolerable to her, a shame and a hissing. For a money trouble she would open her purse, having had experience of poverty in the days before her parents grew prosperous; for a love trouble she had nothing but a self-satisfied contempt, and, for a sister who had loved too much—from whatever reason—she had a feeling which would have made her draw in her skirts with a sneer, should she pass such an one in the street. To her, the woman who had staked her all upon one man and lost it was the same as another who made a profession of such lapses; she had excellent theories of life, but she had seen nothing of it. She was, however, true to them, true to herself and true in her speech, though, in her mind, there was but one point of view to be taken by all decent people, and that was her own. Her leniency to Williams, who could look back on past dishonesty, was one of those contradictions which come, now and then, even to the consistent, and, for once in her life, she was ready to believe that a backslider might yet retrace his steps. Besides, George was a man, and she had the idea, curiously common to good women, that, though a man's sins might possibly be condoned, a woman's were unpardonable.

While George went on with his work so quietly, his mind was anything but quiet. He knew his late master well enough to be sure that his threat was no idle one, and that, if the money he had owed him for so long was not produced, Bumpett would never rest until he had him safely by the heels in jail. He had lately been assured in chapel that the way of the transgressor was hard, but it struck him, as he delved on, that the way of the transgressor trying to reform was even harder.

"Who was that climbing upon the fence?" called the voice of Mrs. Walters.

He looked up to see her standing at an open window with an expression of some displeasure upon her face.



"It was Mr. Bumpett, ma'am—the Pig-driver at Abergavenny."

"Why was he shouting in that way into my garden? I heard him say something about 'the law.'"

"'Twas at me," replied Williams, feeling rather foolish.

He drove his spade into the earth with a blow, and went up to the window, mopping his forehead.

"I'm sorry," he began, "but I'm afeard I'll have to go."

"To go? And why?"

"Ah, 'tis no choice o' mine."

"Where are you going, Williams?"

"'Tis very like to be to the jail. I owe Mr. Bumpett a sight o' money, and I can't pay him, ma'am."

She looked at him in astonishment as he stood hanging his head.

"Come into the kitchen," she said, turning from the window.

It was perhaps the first time that any one had ever wished to confide in Mrs. Walters, and, sorely as he longed to do so, it was impossible for George to tell her the whole history of his trouble. But his simplicity and evident belief in her sympathy touched her as they might not have touched a more expansive heart, accustomed to the near contact of other lives. She sat upright on the kitchen settle while he poured out the tale of his debt; it was a common story, badly told, and it had to end just where he would have liked to begin. He felt as if the confession of his past doings would have taken pounds from that weight of shame which he had carried about with him ever since his acceptance of Bumpett's terms. His only comfort was in the fact that his mother had never suspected the life to which he had pledged himself for her sake. He had not known the sympathy of a woman since her death.

He looked down at the earth on his boots as he spoke, for he had forgotten, when he came in, to clean them on the heap of bracken by the doorstep. He was afraid that Mrs. Walters was looking at it too. But her eyes seemed fixed on something far off as she rose, slim and straight, from the settle. What she saw was a man little younger than the one before her, who



had brought disgrace and shame upon her and her house. She could not understand it at all. What earthly temptation could there have been to have made him act as he had acted? Her mouth tightened. How was it that this stranger, this rude labourer, should trust her as her own son had never done? She stared out of the window to where the Twmpa reared its great shoulder, unconscious that she was looking at places nightly trodden by Rhys' feet, and, as her bitterness against him increased, so did her sympathy for the other deepen.

"I will pay Mr. Bumpett," she said suddenly, her back still turned, "and your debt will be to me."

The young man stammered some confused words; he would have liked to say many things, but his tongue failed him in the emergency, as it usually did. But he felt as if the gates of heaven were opening in his face.

"Go on with your work, Williams," said Anne, turning round and waving him out of the room. "I have no more time to talk to you just now."

When he had gone she left the kitchen and went up the wooden staircase leading to the tower; the room that her husband had lived in was kept locked, and had been used for some years as a kind of storehouse for boxes. As she turned the key it screeched in the lock, and she determined to tell Nannie to have the thing oiled; she had not crossed the threshold since Rhys had left Great Masterhouse before the riot. A couple of old bridles were hanging on nails against the wall, for he had used the place to keep odd bits of harness in, and, in obedience to her mistress's orders, Nannie had laid away his clothes in a cupboard at the end of the room. Mrs. Walters paused in front of it; standing in this spot which cried to her of an uncongenial past, she had an impulse to open it and look at the familiar things. She had no love for them and they could but bring back to her mind what it was her daily endeavour to forget, but she was in that experimental humour in which people long to assail their own feelings in the vain hope of finding them a little more impervious than



they supposed. So she looked for the key only to see that it was gone, the old woman having carefully carried it away when she had given the garments to Bumpett, and passed on unknowing that the shelves were almost empty.

Some of Eli's possessions also remained, and she went over to the mantel-piece to see the things she had come up to look at—two little daguerreotypes belonging to her late husband, one of the child who was dead, and one of the son who was living. They were framed in cheap brass, beaten out thin and ornamented with a florid, embossed pattern, and they had little rings behind them, to hang them to the wall. Between them was a similar portrait of herself as a young woman.

She took them up, one in each hand, her lips pressed close together as she carried them to the light. Rhys' bold face looked out at her, the black shadows of the imperfect process giving it an unpleasant harshness. He was standing, his hand on a chair, with the usual looped-up curtain at his back; Eli had been very proud of the picture. The other frame contained the figure of a boy of six. Mrs. Walters could not look at it.

She replaced the two on the mantel-shelf and went out, locking the door. The wound she had carried for years was no harder—not a whit. She went into the parlour, a grim, uninviting room in which she sat when she was at leisure, or when she received any one whose position demanded more than the kitchen, and sitting down at the table, opened a Bible. It was a large book, and she propped it against a Manual of Practical Bee-keeping, turning to one of the chapters set apart by custom as particularly suited to the bereaved. She forced herself to read. It was the orthodox way with religious people of overcoming trouble, and the sect to which she belonged applied the words of Scripture to all circumstances and cases. But though she went through the lines steadily, moving her lips, they gave her no sensation of any kind, and seemed no more applicable to the tumult in her than if they had come from the book of bee-keeping which



supported them. She glued her attention to the page, reading on and pausing after each verse. Presently her lips ceased to move and were still. A large tear rolled slowly out of each eye and ran down her cheek, falling on the red cloth of the table. The muscles of her face were rigid, never moving ; one would not have supposed that she was crying, but for the drops. She took out her handkerchief and dried her eyes, and the act had the air of a concession awkwardly made ; she shut the book and clasped her hands together. Then she opened it again in the Old Testament, and, beginning at one of the denunciatory psalms, read it through to the end.



## CHAPTER XXII

### A BAD DEBT

THE Pig-driver climbed into his high cart like some obscure insect legging its way up the face of a wall. He did not take the reins himself, but let his boy continue driving, so that he might have more leisure to think over the iniquities of George. He was so angry that it cost him quite an effort not to turn the wheels of his chariot towards Abergavenny, and begin at once to make out his bill against him. As he was jolted along he began reckoning up the pounds, shillings and pence on his fingers; but his transactions with other people were so numerous and so odd that he could not make much way through their complications without his accounts, and was forced to wait until he got home in the evening, before he could disentangle Williams' liabilities from the mass of notes among which they reposed.

Bumpett's accounts were like some human beings—only understood by their creator. They were perfectly safe under every prying eye which might light on them, and he could have left the keys of the box in which they were kept at the mercy of any one, and known that their perusal would leave the intruder no wiser than before. Not being a man of letters, and being barely able to read, he had invented certain signs which stood for words he had forgotten or never known how to write. Of figures he had only a small idea, for though he had learnt their character as far as the number five, his knowledge stopped there, and the actual accounts of his shop were kept by a less illiterate nephew, whose interests were bound up



in his own, and whose open and burly appearance suggested the best aspects of the trade.

The old man rushed to his box that evening as soon as he had entered his house, and began to search among the chaos it contained for the record of George's debt. As the papers had not any sort of classification and were stuffed into the bottom, one on the top of another, to make room for all sorts of incongruous articles which shared their home, it took Bumpett some time to find what he wanted. He turned them over and over, smoothing out the creases with his dirty hand, and peering into the medley of hieroglyphics which had been difficult enough to write, and which were now trebly difficult to read. They were of all sorts, but represented chiefly what he considered to be bad or doubtful debts.

"Owd 1 pownd bi Jamestench. he is in prisn. cums out Jooli. March ateen forty 3."

"Owd ileven shilns ninpens bi jane bull for last 5 month. can't get it. shes ded. ateen forty 4."

"Owd from Gorgewillems. Rent. 3 pownd thirteen and fore. August forty 2."

This last document also bore George's sprawling signature, and at the bottom was added, "Made turms with im. James Bumpett."

The treasure was found, and the Pig-driver crammed the other papers back and shut down the lid. Then he took off his hat and put it on again, a habit he had when under emotion; he was very happy. He went below to a room at the back of the shop, and sat down with his nephew to a comfortable meal, for they lived well. When they had finished he took out the paper and, having raked a pair of rusty scissors from the back of a drawer, he cut off the lower part of the page and dropped it into the fire. It did not blaze but smouldered, the words "Made turms with im" standing out in an orange glow on their blackened background. He went to bed feeling ten years younger.

He was in his best spirits as he drove out of Abergavenny next



morning with the precious document in his hand, for the sight of it gave him such pleasure that he did not like to put it in his pocket, but held it clasped tightly until he came within sight of the grey roof of Great Masterhouse.

He had never yet had any dealings with Mrs. Walters, but it was his intention to ask to see her; he had heard that she was a person of strict views, and he hoped to say a few words about George which he had no doubt would make her turn him out of the place. The virulent old man longed to see him begging from door to door. He meant to approach her in the interests of abstract virtue, and to warn her against employing a person whom he knew to be a thief and an evil-doer, one who would corrupt his fellow-servants, and in all probability go off some day of his own accord with as much of her portable property as he could carry. He felt sure that a pious woman such as she was would see the rightness of putting Williams to the door. Though he knew very well that, for reasons of his own, he could not prove his charges, he trusted that her severity would recognize the need of ridding her house of doubtful characters. It was in this hope that he drove into the back yard of the farm.

Anne Walters was sitting in the kitchen with some knitting in her hand, superintending the work of a clumsy girl of fourteen who was washing a whole regiment of delf mugs. They were a sight to breed envy in a collector of modern days, with their patterns and devices of red roses, doggerel verses, and figures of John Barleycorn, Toby Philpott, and other jocund personalities, but she cared little for them, and kept them hidden away in a cupboard where no eye but that of the strolling spider could espy their quaint beauties. The money she had promised to lend Williams had been given him on the previous evening, and she had agreed to stop a portion of his weekly wages until the debt should expire. She was sure that she had done right in helping him, and it was a pleasant thought in her mind as Nannie's face peered in at the kitchen door. Nannie always peered. Though she had been twenty years and



more at Great Masterhouse, she still kept the demeanour of an intruder, and her weather-beaten face came stealthily round the lintel as though its presence were an unlawful act.

"The Pig-driver's in the yard, ma'am, wanting to see you on business."

"The Pig-driver?"

Mrs. Walters raised her eyebrows.

"Mr. Bumpett at Abergavenny. I hear him getting out of the cart."

The girl of fourteen stood open-mouthed; a visitor was a more amusing thing than cleaning china, and the water ran unheeded off her fingers on to the clean sand of the floor.

"Go you out o' this, girl," cried Nannie, pouncing upon her and snatching up the basin, "don't you be gaping there an' the water slitherin' down! Be off, an' take some o' they pots along wi' you, if you don't want a tiert slap on your long ears."

The girl fled with as many of the jugs as she could carry.

Bumpett stood in the doorway trying to construct his expression into one which might find favour with the opposite sex.

"Good-morning," said Mrs. Walters in her cold voice, pointing to a chair.

There was a slight movement of garments in the passage which showed that Nannie was listening outside. The Pig-driver sat down with his hat on his knees; he had not supposed it would be so difficult to start his subject, and he cleared his throat loudly by way of giving himself confidence. His experience had led him to believe his address irresistible, but he knew that people had to be "taken the right way."

"To be sure, this is a fine big place," he began, glancing round the spacious kitchen, "a proud place. I'll lay ye couldn't have paid less nor the size o' five pound ten for that dresser."

"I am not selling my furniture," said Mrs. Walters, inclining to think that the business must be some intended purchase.



"Oh, no, no. Name o' goodness! I didn't mean that," rejoined he, laughing with reassuring waggery. "A fine figger of a lady like you to be sellin' up! A pretty pass that would be."

"May I ask what your business is?" said Anne, drawing herself up. "I have a great deal to do this morning."

He brought his chair a little nearer.

"I've heard a sight o' beautiful words about you," he said, throwing an admiring leer into his eye, "from this one an' that. 'Tis common talk what a fine lady you be wi' your silk an' satins, an' your holy doin's in chapel. Ah, a sad thing it was for the respected Mr. Walters that's gone before to be leavin' ye alone. I'll be bound he hasn't found an angel to match ye in the glorious place where he now is."

It flashed across Mrs. Walters that the Pig-driver must be mad, and she rose from her chair.

"Sit ye down again, do now," he said. "I ax pardon if I be too feelin' in my speech, but what can I do when I see such handsome looks an' high ways before me? A man's heart will feel for ye, seein' ye so unprotected. 'Beauty in distress,' ma'am, as Holy Writ has it." He chuckled at his own aptness of quotation.

"I am not unprotected," said Anne Walters, who was growing very angry, "and you will find it out if you will not come to business or leave the house."

"No offence meant. No doubt eddicated manners seem queer to ye in a plain man like me," he said lightly, drawing the back of his hand across his nose.

"Kindly say what your business is, or go."

Bumpett had fallen into the common masculine error of treating all women alike, and it began to strike him that he was on the wrong tack. His companion was no less sensible to flattery than the rest of her fellow-creatures, but flattery is a dish which should be dressed differently for every person. He took a less gallant attitude.

"I've come to warn ye," he said, dropping his voice.



But she made no movement to regain her seat, for she was thoroughly angry, and she looked down at the eccentric figure of the Pig-driver with an expression of disgust. It was years since she had spoken to any one, except her son and the preacher she followed, who could pretend to an equal position with herself, and the impertinent familiarities of the old man were not to be endured. She debated whether she should send for a couple of her men and have him turned out of the place.

"It's my duty, plain an' pure," he continued, nothing daunted by her silence, "an' I've come from Abergavenny to tell ye what may give ye a turn, an' show ye what ye've got about the place. There's a feller name o' George Williams here, isn't there? Well, he's a limb an' no mistake. A fine sort to be hangin' about a respectable house, he is!"

He paused for a reply, but Anne appeared entirely unmoved by his news and he began to get exasperated. He thumped his stick on the floor.

"Ah, you women!" he cried, "ye're a queer lot! Ye won't believe a word a decent man says, an' yet ye'll believe any scoundrel that comes puggin' his forelock to yer face an' lying an' thievin' behind yer back. Well, ye've got a rare one now. Ye don't know the life he's been leadin'."

Mrs. Walters looked intently at him.

"I do," she said quietly, thinking of what George had admitted to her.

The Pig-driver's blatant demeanour collapsed like a pricked gas-bag; the shreds of it hung round him and that was all. If Williams had been fool enough to place his own safety in the hands of the woman confronting him, then he, Bumpett, was a lost man. In all his calculations he had never pictured any one who would, so to speak, thrust his own head into the prison door, and he made an effort to collect his wits and to find out how much she really knew.

"What were he tellin' ye about himself?" he asked, in a voice from which truculence had suddenly vanished.



"That is my business and no one else's," replied Anne haughtily.

He ground his teeth together.

"If you have no more to say," she continued, after a pause in which the sense of his own impotence nearly drove Bumpett mad, "you had better go."

A wave of rage surged over him. He got up red in the face.

"I'll have him in jail yet!" he cried, flourishing his arm, "I will! I tell 'ee he won't bide here much longer. Look at that!"

And he whipped the paper out of his pocket and slammed it down on the table. Anne watched him with disdain.

"Look 'ee here! Look 'ee here! D'ye see *that*? There's his own name to it—three pound thirteen an' four. Ah, but I've showed mercy on him, I have! An' me waitin' all this time for my money. D'ye see that date?"

His thumb shook as he planted it on the grotesque writing.

"Why should he go to jail if he pays you?"

Bumpett's wrath turned into a fine irony.

"No, no, indeed," he replied, mouthing his words and twisting himself round to look up in Mrs. Walters' face; "he! he! true; true words, ma'am. Ah, I see ye have a wonderful knowledge o' business."

"I will call Williams," she said, "and tell him to pay you."

"Pay me, will he? Not him! He can't," shouted the old man in a kind of ecstasy, as he almost capered by the table.

George came in from the yard at Mrs. Walters' summons; he stopped, hesitating in the passage outside.

"Come in, Williams," she said, with so little trace of expression in her voice that he almost feared the Pig-driver had overruled her good feelings towards him. The old man looked the picture of excited and triumphant malice.

"Mr. Bumpett has come to be paid," she said, as he entered.

"I have," exclaimed Bumpett, "an' high time I was, too. Now then, down wi' your money, George Williams! A rich man like you shouldn't hang back! Where is it, eh?"



He grinned at George as a cat might grin at the mouse between his claws.

The young man put his hands in his trousers pocket and, for answer, turned the whole amount out on the table ; three gold pieces, thirteen silver ones and a fourpenny-bit.

The Pig-driver's countenance presented such a blank wall of astonishment that it was a pity no sufficiently disinterested spectator was present to study it. His errand to Great Master-house was proving so unlike anything he had expected that, for once in his life, he felt himself undone. The weapon with which he had hoped to defeat George had been wrested out of his grasp and turned against himself, and he had no other at hand with which to replace it. He glared at the pile of coin, wrath and cupidity fighting within him ; the sight of the money made him long to touch it, to handle it and appropriate it, and, at the same time, he hated it because its unlooked-for appearance had robbed him of his revenge. He looked from George to Mrs. Walters and from them to the shining heap between them, and his grin fluctuated and finally died out altogether.

Anne opened a drawer in the dresser and took out a sheet of paper which was lying in it, and a pen and ink.

"Williams will want a receipt," she remarked, placing them before the Pig-driver.

"I can't write," he said, looking at the pen with an expression of malignity. "I'm no hand at it, I tell 'ee. I'll need to take it along to Abergavenny to my nephew and get it made out."

"That does not matter," said she composedly, taking up the quill. "You need only write your name. I know you can do that, for you have signed the paper you showed me."

She sat down and, in the same precise hand in which she annotated her Bible, wrote : "Received from George Williams in full payment of debt, three pounds, thirteen shillings and fourpence." Adding the date, she pushed it towards Bumpett.

He would have liked to refuse, but he did not dare to do



so; he could not risk disobliging a person who, for all he knew, was aware of the systematic law-breaking which was the source of his income.

She watched his unwilling pen forming the signature quite unconscious of the hold she had over him.

"Will you please to keep that for me?" said George as she held out the precious receipt.

She turned to Bumpett, putting the paper into her pocket. She belonged to a sex whose natural impulse it is to hit a man when he is down.

"Are you satisfied now?" she inquired, "or have you anything else to warn me about?"

George and the Pig-driver left the kitchen together. Once outside the old man broke into a whirlwind of curses. Williams turned away.

"Come back," gasped Bumpett; "I know what ye've been doin', ye lyin' dog that ye are! Ye've been tellin' that high-nosed, preachin' devil yer sins, have 'ee? An' you swearin' on the Bible when I made terms with 'ee, an' now maybe lettin' loose the whole country on me. Well, ye'll likely swing yesself, ye fool; that's what ye'll get fer yer pains—damn ye!"

"I've never spoke a word about you. I said no more to Mrs. Walters than that I'd led a bad life—and so I have."

Bumpett stared.

"An' was that the meanin' o' what she said?"

"I suppose so," said Williams.

The Pig-driver climbed into his cart as he had done the day before; he had never made such a bad business of anything.









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## Book II







## CHAPTER XXIII

### WHITE BLOSSOMS

It was on one of those days which seem to occur only in our youth, that Isoline Ridgeway sat under a cherry-tree on the slope of the field overlooking Crishowell Vicarage. The little puffs of wind which occasionally lifted stray bits of her hair were scented with the scent of may hedges ; the whole world seemed to have broken out into white blossom.

The tree above her head was such a mass of shivering, semi-transparent petals against the blue of the sky, that the endless perspective of bloom held reminiscences of a Japanese painting. At her feet the hill sloped down to the brook and the Vicarage orchard. Below, in a declivity of the field where a spring's course could be traced by the deeper green of the grass to a circle of wet ground, a crop of marsh-marigolds held their cups vigorously above the succulent stems, and green, tea-tray leaves, coarse children of the brown, earth-stained water. Looking beyond the church she could see the indigo outline of the Brecon Hills.

Since the day on which she had left Waterchurch Court three months had gone by, and Harry, on whose expected visit she built so much, had not yet been to Crishowell. Not that this was due to neglect on his part, for things had taken an ill turn, and Mr. Lewis, a few days after his return home, had developed an attack of asthma, to which he was subject, and been told by his doctor that only a complete and immediate change would rid him of the enemy. So uncle and niece had departed almost



at a day's notice, returning in a month to find that Harry had left home, and was expected back in a few weeks.

The disappointment had been keen, but a sustaining belief in her own attractions had helped her through it, and an inward certainty that when he returned he would not delay his coming. Sometimes, it is true, a misgiving would creep into her mind, for she knew that he had gone to London, and the "fine ladies" who, in her imagination, peopled the greater part of the metropolis, might be casting their lures to entangle the feet of so personable a young gentleman. But her fears did not last long, and she argued sensibly enough that these houris would be no new thing to him, and that experience of their devilries had not deterred him from falling down before herself. Was he not fresh from the wicked city when they had first met? She would not disquiet herself, and she did not.

Seeing her so willing to return to the dullness of Crishowell, Mr. Lewis had taken it as a good sign of contentment with her surroundings, and he noted her growing inclination to outdoor exercise with a pleased surprise; it seemed that, after all, her stay with him was to be of some use in directing her mind towards healthy pleasures. He was also a little relieved at finding her able and willing to ramble about by herself, and apparently unresentful at being left so much alone. His parish and his books, his archæology and his correspondence kept him so busy, that a niece who expected much of him would have been a serious inconvenience. He treated her with unvarying kindness and courtesy, but he sighed sometimes as he searched vainly for some trait which should remind him of her dead aunt, the wife he had loved. He had always passed for a self-centred man to whom the fellowship of his kind was trivial, but though his reading and his duties now formed his world, there was a chasm in his life which had opened years before he had come to Crishowell, and was gaping still. As a mere tribute to convention, he would now and then delude himself into the belief that he liked Isoline, but he knew in his heart of hearts that it was only a delusion. He had not cared



much for his wife's family, and the girl was essentially her father's daughter.

One of the first things she had done on getting home was to go to the Pedlar's Stone to meet Rhys Walters, and before her departure she had managed to get to the solitary spot to bid him good-bye. He had taken the news she brought hardly, crying out against all the possible rivals that his jealous heart pictured as assailing her in the semi-fashionable place to which her uncle was ordered. But there was nothing for it but patience, and he got through the time as best he could. The Pig-driver, who kept him supplied with food, was also ready to supply him with Crishowell news, and through him he at last heard of the Vicar's return. Though the days were lengthening, and risk of discovery was greater in consequence, he was at the trysting-place when she appeared. He looked worn and thin, and it was evident by the lines in his face that he had suffered in her absence.

If one lover were away there was still the other left to keep her amused, and it made her the more gracious to the one who remained. The light evenings were no obstacle to the infatuated man, and he was at the Pedlar's Stone daily almost before the sun had set, though he knew that he was risking the little he had left to risk by his action. In the night he constructed a sort of rampart of dead thorn-bushes, disposing them so artfully around a little hollow in the vicinity of the dreaded stone, that if by some strange chance any one should be bold enough to pass by, he and Isoline would be unseen as they sat in the declivity on the further side of it. He reached the place by the most devious ways, taking cover wherever he could find it, sometimes almost crawling along an ancient ditch which ran up the hill, and when the beloved woman had left him, lying in the hollow till the descent of darkness.

As she sat in its shadow, the girl herself looked like the spirit of the blossoming tree. Her white dress was spread round her on the grass, and her shady hat dangled by a white ribbon from her hand. Even she was impressed by the beauty



of the thing above her as she twirled a tuft of flowers in her fingers, wondering whether artificial cherry-blossoms were to be got, and resolving, if so, to trim her next ball-dress with them. She stuck some in her hat and put it on her head, then, remembering that there was no mirror at hand in which the effect could be seen, laughed and tossed it down beside her. A great buzzing fly went past with a hum of wings; but for that the whole world was still; everything was radiating life, and only the yew-tree in the churchyard beneath her laid a dark spot on the uninterrupted flow of light. A man on horseback was turning away from her uncle's door. He must have come up from the road by a footpath, for she had not seen him arrive. Her heart jumped, for it was Harry—Harry riding away, having evidently been told that Mr. Lewis was out. He passed by the stile at the foot of the field, and suddenly looking up, saw her white figure on the slope.

He sprang off, calling Howlie (who was by the duck-pond observing him) to take his horse, and in a moment he had vaulted the stile and was coming towards her.

She awaited him smiling, a lovely colour spread over her face.

"May I stay here?" he asked rather shyly, as he came up.

"Oh, certainly," she replied.

"I so nearly missed you," he exclaimed, as he threw himself upon the grass beside her. "Your uncle was not in. Fancy, if I had not seen you and had gone back again! Do you know I only got home two days ago, and I have come the very first moment I could get away."

"Have you been in London, Mr. Fenton?"

"All the time," said he.

Isoline sighed. "I should so like to go to London. Were you very gay?" she asked.

"Not so very," said Harry, laughing.

"Did you go to any balls?"

"I went to three."



"Oh, tell me. And what were the ladies like? Did they wear beautiful dresses and grand diamonds?"

"Yes, I think they did. But I didn't notice much."

"But what were they like? Can you not remember *anything*? If I went to London I should not forget what I saw."

"But you are cleverer than I am."

"Oh, I don't think you are stupid at all," she said, looking coyly down at her fingers. "I suppose gentlemen do not notice the same things that we ladies do. I hoped that when I saw you again you would be able to bring me all the new fashions."

"You knew I should come then? You did not think I should forget?"

She was silent, turning her head away.

"Isoline, are you glad to see me?"

"Perhaps," she said lightly, swinging her hat which she had picked up from the grass. She was so sure of him that she felt she could afford to dally with the situation.

Harry was young, and his face fell a little. "I don't believe you care a bit," he said.

Again she did not answer.

He came nearer. "Isoline, will you marry me?" he asked very earnestly.

A perfect flood of triumph and excitement poured into her heart, but she made no outward sign of it.

"Do you really mean it, Mr. Fenton?" she said softly.

"Of course I mean it, darling!" he exclaimed. "Do you know one thing that took me to London? I went to get something for you, if you will wear it. Look!" He drew a tiny case from his pocket and opened it. Inside was a ring, a diamond heart surrounded by little pearls.

She clasped her hands together.

"How lovely! How lovely!" she exclaimed. "And is that for me?"



can see you from here.

"But, Isoline, do you love me?"

"Yes, I do indeed!"

"And you will be my wife? You have dear."

"I will," she said, still contemplating him.

"Look at me, dear, tell me you mean you happy, Isoline? I am."

She glanced up at him with her grey eyes.

"I am very happy," she murmured.

Then her look swam away into the far distance, rapt, thinking of what was to come. There was opening in front of her; the man who had put it into her hand. She wondered what would be lions on the threshold, and, if so, how to roar. She thought that she would not mind much, if she could only slip by them successfully.

The future was whispering to Harry too.

"I wonder what your uncle will say," he said.

"I meant to have spoken to him when he has gone out, and so I came up here to you. Can he, Isoline?"

"Oh dear, no," she laughed, wondering at his simplicity. "How could he? Besides, he is



"I shall go and tell them what to say," said Harry valiantly.

"I do not think that your mother will be glad," said she, smiling faintly.

She hardly knew whether this idea was agreeable to her or not. There was a lurking antipathy in her to Lady Harriet, though she had received nothing but civility at her hands; the strangely-different point of view in small things which Harry's mother represented had put her out. It had been uncomfortable, and she had not forgotten it. In her mind the only recognized difference between well-regulated people lay in their social positions. She rather resented the idea of a titled mother-in-law whose simple behaviour suggested an unconsciousness of her advantage.

Her imagination flew on to her wedding. It should not take place at Crishowell, if she could help it. She thought of Hereford Cathedral, and the string of carriages and family chariots waiting outside the close for the company before whom she would be playing the leading part. She pictured herself in white satin and lace being conducted up the aisle, and standing with the eldest son of a county magnate before the Bishop—for no doubt Mr. Fenton would wish the Bishop to marry his son; and finally, being led out by her husband to a carriage with grey horses. She would have the wedding-favours an exact facsimile of some she had once seen, bouquets of orange-blossom which had unexpectedly put forth silver leaves, and which reposed on white satin bows with silver fringe. She was quite certain Lady Harriet had never looked so well as she would on that supreme occasion. There was only one dark blot in all her eminently satisfactory day-dream, and that was the fact that Llewellyn would probably be best man. He was neither creditable nor conciliatory.

She awoke from her reverie to find Harry's eyes fixed upon her with such passionate love and admiration that she was rather startled. So far she had considered him more as an adjunct than as any one possessing a future of his own, and for



Isoline : "What do you mean?  
want to draw back?"

"Oh no," said the girl quickly,  
should ever quarrel."

"Never," he replied fervently ; "I  
you, I am sure."

So they sat and looked down upon  
figure crossed the churchyard.

"There is my uncle," said Isoline  
ought to go down and tell him."

"Oh, not yet," pleaded Harry, "I  
always love this place now."

He looked up into the branches.

"Is not the cherry-blossom prettier  
was thinking how nice it would be to  
with it. Do you think it would suit  
"You'll look lovely."

"And you will not forget my dress  
fashions?" She raised her eyes at  
He seized her hand and kissed it, and  
for the grass was high and the action  
It was long before he forgot the  
the touch of soft fingers as he pressed  
the dancing of sunlight through the



Isoline's beauty and sweetness? He thought of Llewellyn's counsel and the day on which they had so nearly quarrelled by the garden door; it was strange that he—so much cleverer than himself—had taken such an extraordinary view of her character. The recollection made him quite impatient, though he told himself in his generous heart that there was no one like his brother, and that, come what might, his marriage should never in any way shadow their friendship.

Time, he was certain, and a closer experience of Isoline's society, would convince him that he had been mistaken, and he knew Llewellyn well enough to be sure that, when such a change should come to pass, his acknowledgment of his error would be complete. It would all come right, and, meanwhile, life was bathed in an untold glory.

Like all young, open natures who love truly, Harry was humble. His own inferiority to the girl at his side was manifest to him as he looked up at her through the grasses. His life had been, if anything, rather more regular than that of the ordinary young man, for the extreme genuineness of his nature had necessitated that some real feeling, however transient, should direct his desires. Nevertheless, temptations that assailed others had not stepped aside in his favour, and it was a miracle to him that this creature, so delicate, so pure, so refined, should be willing to walk out of the fairy radiance of her maiden kingdom to join hands with him. The little demure air that never left her, even when she had seemed most near to him, was a charm. There was always a suggestion about her of not giving too much, and he admired it as he might have admired the delicacy of scent in a white flower.

He loved refinement, though he could not distinguish between the false and the true, being younger in his mind than in his years; and it is the irony of life that a knowledge of valuations comes to many—indeed to most—when it is too late to be useful. He had reverence in him and a high ideal of womanhood; though it was a crude one, it was the best that



his youth and unanalytic nature could frame. The dainty calm and reserve with which Isoline had met his obvious love was as if the white flower grew on a height to be scaled with patience, and bloomed to be touched by one hand alone. He was not the first to mistake coldness for purity.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### A CARD HOUSE

THE news of the engagement fell like a bombshell into the circle at Waterchurch; to all but Llewellyn it came as an absolute surprise. Harry's temporary attachment to any pretty girl who came in his way was taken as such a matter of course by his parents, that the attentions he had bestowed on Isoline during the few days she had stayed with them were nothing out of the ordinary run of events.

Mr. Lewis had made his consent conditional, promising to give it when he should hear of the Squire's approval, and withholding it entirely till Harry should assure him of the sanction. Isoline, to whom her uncle's decision suggested a flying in the face of Providence, relapsed into soft obstinacy, submitting outwardly to what for the moment seemed inevitable, and covering a persistence which would recognize no scruple with a layer of docility. Her attitude was that of a sand-bag towards a bullet—it offered no visible resistance. At the same time it was impenetrable.

The Vicar had but little respect for the conventional view of marriage. While he held it unwise for young people to plunge hand in hand into the dismal bog of extreme poverty, only to waste their youth and strength in the sordid flounderings which alone can keep their heads above water, his ideas of the important things of life were at variance with those of most people. He regarded the poverty which necessitates some self-denial as a strengthener of the bonds which tie those whose love is love indeed, and the outward circumstances



and he had studied men and women  
mental search after truth had been k  
liked half-truths so little that it irked  
those whose current coin they were.  
preferred lies. That was one reason  
him. There was only one person ar  
whom he felt himself in true accord, a  
Fenton. She was a woman whom no c  
could ever induce to deal in false val

The tying up for life of two peop  
more awful to the Vicar than it does  
for he reckoned with things to whose  
is paid. The power of two characte  
other, was in his eyes a more real thi  
purses to maintain the establishment  
expect of them. But while he held  
seen enough to show him that to  
suitable establishment is all-satisfying  
in a lukewarm felicity until death pa  
strong meat is not for babes. Isolinc  
not so sure about Harry. Mr. Fen  
secret to him, and he was aware tha  
marry, he would have to content  
Fenton even when her husband shou



impetuous ways struck him less as blunt intelligence than as late development, and he believed that, were he to develop in the society of Isoline, he would develop away from her; his character at twenty-five was yet in the making, while hers, at nineteen, was set. All this was more to him than the fact that his niece would, socially speaking, be marrying well.

As they sat at breakfast on the following morning with the windows wide open to the orchard, he began upon the subject.

"Isoline, I feel that I ought to tell you a few things you may not know. If Mr. Fenton gives his consent, and I consequently give mine, I suppose you and Harry will expect to be married before very long. You have always had most things that you want, being an only child; do you think you will be quite happy with less? You may think perhaps that Mr. Fenton is a rich man."

"I am not accepting Harry for his money," observed Isoline, with dignity.

"That would be rather difficult, my dear, seeing that he has not got any," said the Vicar, with some dryness.

She opened her eyes. "I hardly understand. What should I have to do without?"

"Well, I fancy you spend a good deal upon your dresses for a young girl. Not that I blame you, for you always look very nice, and you have seventy pounds a year of your own to be pretty with. Of course, when you are here you are my guest, and you are no expense, for what does for me does for us both. I think your aunt in Hereford finds the same—and rightly."

She nodded.

"It would be hard indeed if you had not a home while we are so well able to afford you one," continued the Vicar, who had denied himself a much-needed carpet for his study in order to add a few luxuries to her bedroom.

"You are both most kind to me."

"But, my dear, it is only right. All the same I cannot help



fearing that you may miss it. You will not have so many new gowns and smart hats."

Isoline said nothing, but she looked a little incredulous.

"Harry's father allows him two hundred a year. If he married he might possibly increase it a little—a very little—but I know that is all he could do. Harry has no profession. Personally, I think that a mistake, for, in my opinion, every young man who has not learned to work has missed something, but that is Mr. Fenton's affair, not mine. Between you both, you would not have three hundred a year, and, even if a little more were forthcoming, you would barely have three hundred and fifty. That is very well when a man has something to work at."

"But why will not Mr. Fenton give Harry more?"

"He has not got it to give."

She looked dumbly at him, tears gathering in her eyes; her lips quivered.

"My dear, my dear," said her uncle, "don't be so upset. I did not mean to dishearten you, but it was right to tell you the truth. We have not heard what the Squire has to say, and something might be found, no doubt, for Harry to do."

He was quite glad to see her display some real feeling, and he came round to her side and put his arm tenderly about her.

"Don't, my little girl, do not be so distressed," he said, pressing his lined cheek against her soft one. "If Mr. Fenton says 'Yes,' and Harry is a man—which I am sure he is—we shall find some way out of the difficulty. It will be a capital thing for him to work a little, for he will want money all his life, if he is to stand in his father's place."

She wept on unrestrainedly, and her emotion touched him; it roused in him a hope that he had judged her hardly. After all, he had possibly often misunderstood her, and Harry's affection might yet bring out things her education had stifled. Though the small interests of provincial town life were bad training for a woman, they might not have quite succeeded in



spoiling her. But it was not for love that her tears flowed, it was for a fallen card house.

He spoke very gravely and gently.

"You will have to do your best for him, as Lady Harriet has done for his father," he continued, still encircling her with his arm. "You will have a good model in your mother-in-law, Isoline."

A feeling of dislike went through her as she thought of Lady Harriet's plain clothes and the way she had tramped through the mud of the farmyard when she had shown her the Alderney cows; she seemed to have supposed that it would amuse her to see these dull animals. And then, her strong boots! It was horrible, unfeminine. She had certainly worn a silk gown at dinner, with a piece of valuable lace on it, but it had been the same one each night. And this was to be her pattern!

"I did not care very much for Lady Harriet," she faltered.

"You have not seen her very often," replied the Vicar; "she is one of those women of whom one can say that the more one knows them, the more one honours them."

"Why?" asked Isoline. "What does she do?"

"Mr. Fenton has lived very much up to his income, and they have to be extremely careful. There is a great deal of business to be done, more than he can manage, and she is invaluable in the help she gives him. She spends nothing on herself; her whole heart is in the place. If it were not for her, I don't know that it would be in the Squire's possession now."

Isoline did not return her uncle's caress in any way, but she dried her eyes, and went cheerlessly on with her breakfast. After it was over she went out into the orchard, and strolled down to where it met the brook. She stood for a few minutes looking disconsolately into the water as it bubbled by; across it she could see up the sloping field to the cherry-tree under which she had sat on the preceding day. How happy she had been then!



She pitied herself sincerely. The light which had glimmered before her during all her stay at Crishowell had proved to be no better than a malignant Jack-o'-lantern luring her on to the unsolid ground. But the fatal step had not been taken, though she had put out her foot; her uncle had shown her to what she was on the verge of trusting herself.

She felt vaguely resentful against Harry. What business had he, she asked herself, to entangle her in this way, knowing, as know he must, that he had nothing to support her with decently? It was not fair. She turned from the brookside and walked back towards the house. Howlie Seaborne was coming towards her with a letter in his hand. He held it out between thumb and forefinger.

Though she had never received a letter from Harry, she knew by instinct where this one had come from, and took it carelessly, conscious that the boy was staring critically at her with his prominent eyes. She turned it over as though doubtful of its origin.

"It's from the young general," explained Howlie.

Her disapproving face made him cover his mouth quickly with his hand as though the words had escaped from it unawares. It was an indescribably vulgar action.

"Is there any answer?" she inquired.

"Don't know," said Howlie shortly.

"But did you ask?"

"Naw; an' oi can't stop 'im now, no more nor if he was a lump o' dirt rowlin' down the hill."

"But who was he?" she asked, with a wild thought that Harry might have brought the letter in person.

"A man with a squintin' oye."

She walked away from him, breaking the seal, and he returned to the kitchen, his tongue in his cheek; he was a Herefordshire boy who had only come to the place a few months before, but there was little he did not know, and he was well aware that the messenger lived one mile from Waterchurch Court.



"Darling," the letter began, "I cannot help writing to you so soon, though I have not very much to tell. I have spoken to my father. I am afraid we may have some difficulties, but I have not had the chance of a serious talk with him yet, and I cannot quite tell you anything definite. But, whatever happens, I will *never, never* give you up, and all will come right in the end, I know, if we are only true to each other. I will trust you, darling, be sure, and you know that I am always your devoted lover,

"H. FENTON.

"P.S.—Oh, Isoline, how I love you ! How I wish we were sitting under the cherry-tree again !"

She could not help being pleased with the letter, it rang so true ; and for the moment, as Harry, honest and trusting, was brought more vividly before her by his written words, she sighed to think of the undeserved ill-turn her luck had played her. She was regretful as she thought how much he loved her. What a smart air he had ! What a handsome, bright face ! He seemed so proper a person—so like the husband she had pictured as a suitable one for herself, that it was almost a risk to sever herself from him. He was a man with whom any girl might be proud to show herself, and he would, socially, give her the place for which she felt fitted. The feeling was so strong that it went near to overwhelming her more prudent considerations. Might it not, after all, be better to throw in her lot with him ? Though he could not give her the riches she had dreamed of before her uncle had shattered the dream, she would, as his wife, be somebody. But then, she would have to economize, to deny herself—do all the horrible things that Lady Harriet did, and there would be no going to London and entering the brilliant vista of balls, operas, and dinner-parties at which it had been her hope to shine.

She had imagined her carriage surrounded by a circle of admirers, as were the carriages of the "fine ladies" she had



read about, while she lay back on her cushions and listened to the hum of compliment with which the air would be filled. That would never be a reality if she married a poor man. A mere chance had brought such possibilities within her reach, but they had melted away—snares and delusions—leaving only a vision of drudgery and homeliness behind. Small wonder if she had wept.

She had barely enjoyed an hour's possession of the ring Harry brought her, for it had lain in Mr. Lewis' desk since the evening before, when her lover had broken the news to him and heard his verdict. The Vicar would not allow his niece to wear it until Mr. Fenton's consent should formally ratify the engagement, and he had insisted upon its being returned. The young man had stoutly refused to take it back, and, by way of settling the difficulty, it had been sealed up in a little box and locked into the desk in which the parish money and one or two valuables were kept. It had been a bitter disappointment, and it was followed by a worse one.

She wondered what her aunt in Hereford would think of her engagement, and believed that, were she beside her at present, she would exert herself much to prevent its being broken, her ambitions being more social than pecuniary. She was really very thankful that Miss Ridgeway was not at Crishowell, for the course she meant to take would be made far harder by the lady's presence.

She looked upon the doctor who had postponed her return for several months as her own unconscious benefactor, and she cherished the hope of inducing Mr. Lewis to be silent so that her aunt might never know what had happened. She would consider Harry's proposal as a grand chance, and would not understand at how far too high a price that chance would have to be taken. There were troublous times in front of her she could not but suspect; Mr. Fenton might consent, and Harry would be by no means easy to deal with; but she had her uncle's word that money obstacles would be great, and on these she would take her stand with as much determination as



she could show with propriety. It would have to be gone through, and the notion made her shudder. The gin of her own making might be closing round her, but, at all events, she would have one frantic leap for freedom before the teeth shut.

The letter lay in her pocket, and she took it out and re-read it; its black and white page spread on her knee looked to her like some dangerous document binding her to the fate from which she so desired to flee. "Whatever happens I will *never*, *never* give you up," it said. She went quickly down the orchard, and, standing by the brook, tore it into small pieces, parting her fingers widely and letting the fragments float outwards on the water. They were carried along, disappearing one after another in the little rapids between the stones. A wagtail, curtsying with its feet in the eddy, jumped up and twittered away into the green of the undergrowth with a parti-coloured flash of wings.

She saw the last scrap of the letter turning a bend of the bank and sailing swiftly under the shadow of the footbridge, and then went back to the house with a sigh of relief, unconscious that Howlie's eyes were watching her attentively from the kitchen window.

The boy drew a long breath of astonishment, and opened his mouth as he observed her action. He admired Harry greatly.



## CHAPTER XXV

### LLANGARTH FAIR

THE generosity of those who admired the toll-keeper's excellent exit from this life had placed his daughter beyond the possibility of want.

Public admiration, which, in like instances, will often display itself in ornamenting a memory that is already the most ornamental thing possible, had been leavened by the common-sense of the Vicar. He maintained that the plainest stone would be as efficient a background to the proud record it bore as the most expensive article ever turned out of a stone-cutter's yard. He also added that the sincerest homage offered to the dead would, in this case, be the care of the living.

The gentlemen representing the district were impressed by the view he took, as men often are by the words of those who speak little, and though their wives, on hearing of the decision, sniffed and opined that any expenditure on the hussy would be a throwing away of good money, they decided to take his advice and to leave its carrying out in his hands. They thus had the agreeable experience of feeling broad-minded and saving themselves trouble in one and the same act ; the situation had novelty as well as convenience, and they folded their hands upon their ample persons in easy after-dinner enjoyment of the good deed. Lady Harriet's was the one dissenting voice in the general female opinion. In this, as in most things, she was Mr. Lewis' warmest supporter, adding a private mite out of her slim purse ; the peculiar horror of Mary's situation left no room in her mind for more creditable feelings.



By the time Harry's love affair had come to a point, an arrangement had been made on her behalf. Eager to work for her living, she accepted the small provision made for her gratefully, while she assured her benefactors of her wish to help herself as far as she could for the future. She begged them to get her some decent work. The little board before whom she was summoned was impressed by the slender, firm creature, her gentle demeanour and sensible answers, as she stood in front of them and made her request. Afterwards, one member even tried to describe her to his wife, but the lady frowned him down, pointing to the freckled miss who crowned their union, and who now sat at her wool-work within earshot of the pair.

But, in spite of the sneers and charges of infatuation for a pretty face brought against the gentlemen by their spouses, she obtained the interest she needed, and a place was found for her in a little greengrocer's shop at Llangarth. The owner, an old woman becoming rapidly infirm, wanted a girl to act as servant and saleswoman, offering a home and a small wage in return for the help. The Vicar, who was particular on the point, hid no part of Mary's history from her employer, but it was received without comment as too ordinary an occurrence to need notice. So one afternoon she started for the town, a bundle in her hand and her new life waiting a few miles in front.

She walked along, a kind of reluctance clinging round her footsteps. The independent course she had asked for was near, but, now that she had launched herself, she felt internally cold.

Her new employer was a stranger, and the friends she had just left seemed to be receding very far away. She looked mentally back on them, as a traveller ferrying across to an unfamiliar shore looks back at the faces on the brink. She could see the roofs of Llangarth appearing in the green and blue of the landscape, and the smoke curling among the trees. She paused and laid down her bundle, leaning against a gate. A path which was a short cut to the town from the uplands of Crishowell, ran, a wavy line through the clover and daisies,



towards her halting-place ; and, though a man's figure was coming along it, she was so much pre-occupied that she did not notice his approach. It was only when he stood not a yard from her that she moved aside to let him pass. The man was George Williams.

Mary had thought many times of their parting, and, as the wound in her mind began to ache less and her agonizing sensitiveness to abate, her judgment grew straighter. She began to see that she had done George a wrong, misjudging his impulses, and she sincerely wished her words unsaid ; but, being one of those souls to whom explanation is torture, she had made no sign. Even now, though she longed to set it right, she could find no voice for a moment. He passed her with an indistinct word.

"George."

He stopped immediately.

"George, I treated you bad when I shut the door on you. I didn't understand. It's hard to do right," said Mary simply.

"Then you bean't angry, Mary? Not now?"

"No, no."

Facing each other, there seemed nothing more to say. In their state of life there are no small embroideries round the main subject.

"I'm going to Llangarth," said the girl, with a clumsy attempt at ending the episode.

"So am I," said he.

Looking down, he noticed her bundle, which he had almost rolled into the ditch as he opened the gate ; the four corners were knotted in the middle, and under the knot was stuck a bunch of flowers—wallflower, rhybes, and a couple of pheasant-eye narcissus.

"Have you left the toll?" he asked, taking it up from the clump of nettles upon which it had fallen.

She nodded.

"I'll work for myself now."

A pang of apprehension went through him



"Where are you going? You won't go further nor Llangarth, surely?"

"I'm to help Mrs. Powell. Her that keeps the shop by the market. The Vicar of Crishowell knows her, and 'twas him got me the place. I'll do my best," added Mary, holding out her hand for the bundle; "let me go on, now."

"I'll go with you a bit," said George.

They took the road together, looking very much like a respectable young peasant family starting on a holiday, but for the fact that the man walked beside the woman, not in front of her, and that there was no baby.

The rhybes scented everything. Mary drew the nosegay from the bundle; she liked to keep it in her hand, for the touch and smell of something familiar was necessary to her as she stepped along towards her new world. After the solitary position of the Dipping-Pool, and her seclusion at the toll-house, Llangarth seemed nothing short of a metropolis.

"I'll be coming into market, time an' again," began Williams, after a few minutes. "Would I see you, do you think? I have to go into the town for Mrs. Walters sometimes."

He spoke without a trace of anxiety, but he had been longing and fearing to ask the question.

"For Mrs. Walters?"

"Yes," replied he, fixing his eyes on the road about a hundred yards ahead. "I'm working for her now at Great Masterhouse."

Mary bit her lip. The news surprised her, and the sound of Rhys' name affected her as the word "gallows" might affect a reprieved man.

"Of a Sunday," urged George, "I could step down to Llangarth and get a sight of you."

She was silent.

"But, perhaps you wouldn't like it. I wish you wasn't so set against me."

"I'm not set against you."

"But you don't like to see me."



"I do ; but——"

"What's wrong wi' you, Mary? Speak out."

"I'm feared of you, George."

He swore under his breath."

"Promise you won't ever speak like you did at the toll," she faltered, "not ever again."

Williams set his lips ; his short space of prosperity had raised his spirit, and he was no longer so much inclined to accept reverses as natural events. For some time he had earned good wages, and he was already beginning to lessen his debt to Mrs. Walters ; in a short time it would no longer exist. He was a different being from the Pig-driver's sullen, dispirited servant. That hated bondage had crushed all the instincts of young manhood, and made him into a kind of machine for endurance. They now had freedom to rise in him, and he longed for a little joy beyond the mere joy of his release. He could not have framed it for himself, but he was craving for emotion, for femininity, for love, for children, for all that might be centred in the woman beside him. He picked up a stone and threw it smartly into the boughs of an elm-tree. It was a rebellious action.

"I can't," he said shortly, "and I won't."

"Then I can't see you any more. You were to stand by me that day when—after—at the river, but it's different now, it seems."

"'Tis different. It's one thing or the other now. Oh ! Mary, an' I would be good to you."

For reply she quickened her pace.

George struck at the bushes with the stick he carried. In spite of the good fortune of their meeting, in spite of the words that had set all right between them, they had slipped back into the old place. The sky had cleared indeed, but the clouds were rolling up again.

They arrived at the outskirts of Llangarth without exchanging another word or looking at each other ; the girl kept her head turned away, with that uncomfortable sensation that we



all know when we do not wish to meet the eye of our neighbour, and feel, consequently, as if we had only one side to our faces. When a steep street branched down to the market, she put out her hand timidly for the bundle, but he took no notice of it, and where the pavement narrowed, he fell behind, so that he might look at her unabashed as she went on before him holding the cottage bouquet close.

The town was unusually full, it being the day of a half-yearly fair, and Mary became almost bewildered by the stream of passers. Soon it grew clear that she had missed her way, and that the line she was following would eventually bring her out near the river, some way from her destination. George, who did not know the exact place for which she was making, kept behind; she tried to retrieve her mistake by a short cut, and, turning a corner, found herself in the very middle of the fair.

The place was a moving mass of humanity; country boys with their awkward gait elbowing about among the trimmer townspeople, girls in their best head-gear, lingering in groups in the attractive vicinity of a double row of booths bisecting the crowd. A merry-go-round, whose shrill pipes and flags assailed both ear and eye, creaked on its ceaseless round of measured giddiness, and behind it a drum, high on a platform, was being beaten with a certain violent decorum, which announced that the action was no outcome of the performer's spirit, but part of a recognized scheme.

Far away from it a rival was found in a Cheap Jack, who proclaimed the merits of bootlaces, tin-whistles, coloured ribbons, and a stack of inferior umbrellas propped against the rush-bottomed chair which formed alike his rostrum and his stronghold. His assistant stood before him, keeping back the dense ring which threatened to submerge him, and using one of the umbrellas for the purpose.

The purely agricultural part of the fair had its stand on a piece of high ground, where some fat beasts with indifferent faces occupied a line of pens. In front of them James Bumpett sat in his cart surveying the exhibition. Farm-horses



“This isn’t the road I thought,” s  
must have taken the wrong corner son  
the name of the street, but it’s nigh the

“Then we can get across to it this w  
beginning to make a passage through t  
close to me.”

He shouldered a path through the  
a big fair, and the inhabitants of othe  
it largely ; one or two lounging youths  
side looked impertinently at Mary, wh  
spicuous by the flowers she carried.  
her companion ; he drew her hand ur  
went forward.

They passed the pens where the live  
the gaze of the initiated, and found the  
of curtained platform, at either end  
placard. To judge by these, all the n  
the earth contained were to be found t  
would, when the showman had colle  
bystanders, be revealed to the public  
so thick in this place that George and  
impossible to move, though they had  
see the Fat Woman. the Wild Indian t



"An' about toime too," observed the voice of Howlie Seaborne, who was in the foremost row of spectators; "oi thought them coppers would be moiking a fresh 'ole in the crown."

For three months Howlie had kept Harry's gift intact; he had laid it carefully by, resisting any temptation to spend even a fraction, so that, when Llangarth Fair should come round, his cup of pleasure should be brimming. He had already laid a shilling out on a knife which he admired, but, in the main, he had gone down the row of booths casting withering looks on such wares as displeased him, occasionally taking up some article, and, after a careful examination, laying it down again with quiet contempt.

Sweets were simply beneath his notice, and he passed the places in which they were displayed more insolently than any others. To him, the merry-go-round was foolishness, and those who trusted their persons astride of puce-coloured dragons and grass-green horses, fools; but the mysteries behind the curtain appealed to his curiosity. He now stood in the most desirable position amongst the audience waiting for the show to begin; on his right was a stout, high-nosed farmer's wife in a black silk bonnet.

After a short disappearance the showman came forward carrying a stick with which he tapped the curtain. It flew up disclosing a stupendous lady in purple velveteen, with a wreath of scarlet wax camellias on her head. She was seated at a table.

"Seenyora Louisa, a native of Italy! The stoutest female living!" bawled the showman. The lady blew a promiscuous kiss. "She will now sing an Italian song!"

At this the lady rose and took a step forward, the stage shaking under her tread. She cleared her throat and began in a shrill treble, so disproportionate to her size that the effect was more startling than if she had roared aloud, as, indeed, one almost expected her to do. The song was evidently a translation.



## THE SHEEP-STEALERS

"I am far from my country alone,  
And my friends and my parents so true.  
From the land of my birth I have flown,  
And the faces around me are new !

I weep and I sigh all the day,  
And dream of fair Italy's shore ;  
How can I be lightsome and gay,  
When perchance I shall see it no more ?"

"Well, I never !" exclaimed the woman in the black silk bonnet, "pore thing ! I always did say as I hated them furrin' countries, but I suppose them as is born in them is used to them."

"Waft me, ye winds, to my home,  
Where my light skiff bounds on the wave ;  
My heart is too weary to roam,  
And its rest is the wanderer's grave !"

Here the exile turned her eyes upwards and sat thunderously down, a pocket-handkerchief at her face.

"'Tis a bad case, pore lady," said the farmer's wife again.

"*That* ain't no loidy," remarked Howlie shortly.

"Hold yer tongue, ye varmint," said the farmer's wife.

For once in his life Howlie was nonplussed ; chance had thrown him against one of the few people fitted to deal with him.

He would have liked to make some suitable reply, but the eyes of his neighbour were fixed upon the stage from which Signora Louisa's chair was being removed. The curtain dropped.

When it rose again the audience drew a long breath. A pasteboard rock, much the size of the Signora, - filled the place where she had sat, and to it, by a rope, was attached a middle-aged woman, whose considerable good looks had departed, leaving a cloud of rouge behind. Her position seemed to have produced no sort of effect upon her, for her face was as placid as if she were at her own fireside. She looked not unlike a dog tied up outside a public-house and



waiting for its master. She was enveloped in blue muslin, which stopped midway between knee and ankle, and left her arms and shoulders bare.

"'Ere we 'ave the drama of St. George and the Dragon," announced the showman. "The Princess, forsook by all, waits 'er doom."

"The hussy!" exclaimed the farmer's wife, turning severely on Howlie. "Go you home, boy, 'tis no place for decent folks. Princess, indeed! I'd Princess her."

Howlie smiled and looked tolerantly at his enemy, but made no effort to move; had he wished to, he could hardly have done so, the crowd was so thick. Awful puffings and roarings proclaimed the approach of the Dragon, and the farmer's wife began to get nervous.

Anything was to be expected from such a godless exhibition, and, in spite of a high nose and a strict moral attitude, her heart began to quake. As in the case of most women, fear made her angry. She took Howlie fiercely by the arm.

"D'ye hear me, boy?" she cried.

"Oi feel yew, anyhow," said he.

The Dragon had now passed the wings of the stage, and his dire appearance was producing a great effect. The owner of the black silk bonnet turned and found herself confronted by George and Mary, who were wedged up in the row immediately behind her.

"Help me out o' this, young man," she said authoritatively, but with a suspicious quaver in her voice. "I don't think much of that sort o' show, an' I don't think much of you, neither, letting your missus stand looking at loose sights."

Mary turned crimson.

"'Tis hard to get free of this maze o' folk," answered Williams.

"I'm going to try it, howsomenever," continued the farmer's wife, "and you might lend me a hand if you be going too. My screwmatics is that bad that I can't shove about me as I'd like to." She looked resolutely round upon the crowd.



"I'll do what I can," said George, beginning to push his way to a freer space.

The whole concourse having its senses completely centred upon the Dragon it made but little resistance, and as long as its eyes might remain fixed on him, it hardly cared what became of the rest of its body. George's efforts were supplemented by those of the sturdy woman behind him, and they soon arrived at the outskirts of the fair.

"Thank ye," she said, as she mopped her shining forehead; "just you take that young missus o' yours home. She's dead tired, I can see that, pore lass."

And she left them.

George walked with his companion to the door of her new home and parted from her. He asked her again to let him go to see her now and then. She hesitated, and finally said yes.



## CHAPTER XXVI

### HOWLIE AND LLEWELLYN UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER

HOWLIE SEABORNE, who liked to get his money's worth out of things, was anxious to see the performance through. He did not pay his neighbour of the black silk bonnet so much as the tribute of a glance as she pushed her way out behind the ex-sheep-stealer.

He had still a respectable amount of coppers in his pocket, and while this held out, he had no thoughts of going home.

The spectacle was assuming a very spirited character, for the blue muslin victim was beginning to realize her situation and the Dragon to writhe horribly. Popular interest was consequently rising to high-water-mark. Behind the stage St. George had mounted a spare-looking pony and was drawing a pasteboard sword. Bloodshed, in the spectators' opinion, was the only thing left to be desired.

Just behind Howlie stood two men who had been busy in the same part of the fair as Bumpett, and were now stopping for a minute to cast amused eyes on the realistic splendours of St. George. Squire Fenton and Llewellyn had finished their business and were on their way to the Bell Inn, where they had left their gig, but the hisses of the reptile gaping on the stage made them pause to see the end of the drama. Both recognized Howlie, for he had become something of a celebrity since the Rebecca riot, and they had also seen him at Crishowell Vicarage.

The hoofs of the Saint's steed were to be heard clattering on



the slanting board up which he had to ride to the platform, for the spare-looking pony was new to the work and seemed disinclined to go on. He had been borrowed to replace another animal which was sick and could not appear in the scene, and his rider, who, in a rough way, was something of a horseman, had to use a good deal of persuasion. At last, after some difficulty, he rode triumphantly forward to where the Dragon breathed forth fire and slaughter.

The Dragon, like many of us, was made of different stuff inside from what one might have supposed. His interior was nothing less than two small boys, one of whom formed his head and fore-parts, while the other represented his tail ; they were enclosed in padded straw, covered with sacking roughly painted to represent scales, and the front boy had a little store of squibs and crackers which he fired out of the monster's mouth as he went along.

After being persuaded to get upon the stage, the pony moved forward a few steps, while his rider waved his sword, challenging the reptile loudly and advancing past the Princess to meet him. As soon as they came close together a perfect volcano of squibs flew out in the astonished beast's face, and he reared up so suddenly that the Saint, who was lunging at his foe, almost lost his balance. The sword stuck in a crevice of the Dragon's hide, and, though the blade was pasteboard, the stuff, being rotten, was ripped open, and a great patch of straw bulged out. Mr. Fenton and Llewellyn laughed, but the audience, which had little sense of incongruity, was as serious as ever. The Dragon, pleased to his inmost parts by his success, blew out another shower. One red spark settled on the straw, then another, and another. There was a crackle, an exclamation ; the pony turned and jumped off the low platform into the middle of the people, depositing its rider at their feet, and the terrible scream of childish agony rose from the two poor little prisoners in their shroud of living flame.

Women shrieked, the men made inarticulate noises and



stared open-eyed. One or two moved in the irresolution of stupidity. The Squire caught at his son's arm, unconsciously revealing that dependence of which he had never been suspected. But there was none to read the sign.

Before any one could make up his mind what to do, Llewellyn Fenton had bounded on to the platform and was stooping over the blazing mass that writhed upon the boards, tearing with his strong hands a great opening in the fore-part of the Dragon. The smoke was blinding, and the oil and paint which coated the sacking gave substance to the flames. He had got fast hold of one of the boys and was dragging him free; through the reek he could see that his face was uninjured. But the fire was spreading its venomous tongues down towards the tail which contained another human life. One cannot do two things at once. He looked round in desperation and saw Howlie's rabbit face at his side.

"Tear it open!" he cried. "Tear it open!"

A fresh burst of flame was blowing in his eyes.

The boy he had rescued was on his feet, but the fire had caught his shirt and he was trying to break away in the madness of his terror.

By this time Mr. Fenton had come close to the stage; he pulled off the thick coat he wore and tossed it up to Llewellyn. The young man smothered the child in its close folds, throwing him down and rolling him over as though he were fighting with a wild beast.

The boy who played the other half of the Dragon was almost safe, thanks to Howlie's efforts. He had broken out of his prison uninjured and was free, all but one leg which was held fast.

In order that the monster might lash its tail properly there was a curious arrangement of steel wire at the point at which it began to narrow, and in this the victim's foot had caught. The fire was approaching it and his cries increased; his struggles were pitiful to see. As Llewellyn had prevailed and was



supporting one boy, more frightened than hurt, the crowd's horrified attention was now fixed on the other. It did not notice Howlie Seaborne, whose arms were plunged up to the elbows in the Dragon's carcase. In each hand he grasped a piece of the steel-trap which he was forcing doggedly apart. His face was growing grey and his eyes stared ; for almost the first time in his life his mouth was shut. This was because he was grinding his teeth together.

The thing which takes so many words to say had happened all in a moment, and St. George had barely had time to extricate himself from his stirrup and to run behind the scenes. He now returned with a bucket of water, which he held upside down over the burning tail just as Howlie had bent the wires enough to set the prisoner free. The water hissed and the steam rose in a column.

A few people from the crowd had come up and pressed in a little circle round the two children ; the blue muslin lady was weeping tempestuously. The showman, in his costume of St. George, began, with Mr. Fenton, to examine the burnt foot. The boy was crying with pain, but the injuries did not seem extensive.

"Well done, boy!" said Llewellyn, as he came up to Howlie, very white and smelling dreadfully of smoke.

The words raised a ghost of the vertical smile, but it faded so strangely that he looked down lower than the rabbit face. "My God!" he cried, as he saw the arms and hands.

The circle of onlookers turned round, and Mr. Fenton made an exclamation.

"Is it very bad?" he asked with some futility.

"Might be worse, a' suppose," replied Howlie, as he fainted into Llewellyn's arms.

The little group was becoming the centre of a dense mass.

People who stood in their places while they might have been of some use, now thrust their bodies between the fresh air and those who needed it, after the manner of crowds.



It was very evident that, of the two sufferers, Howlie was the worst; pain was bringing him again to consciousness, and he lay back against Mr. Fenton's shoulder, his face looking strangely unfamiliar; nothing seemed to remain the same but a certain stubbornness. Llewellyn was on his way to fetch his father's gig, and, as he went, he pulled off the fragments of the dogskin driving-gloves which he had, by good fortune, been wearing when the accident occurred. A man was dispatched to the nearest doctor's house. The Squire adjured the bystanders to summon the police, a request of which they naturally took no count, being disinclined to have themselves dispersed. Two or three talked about the Infirmary.

Howlie's eyes sought the Squire's.

"What is it, my boy?" said he.

"Toike me 'ome to Parson's," said Howlie faintly.

"Ah, the Infirmary; that be the place for he," chimed in a man who had lately refused to go there himself when a drunken fight had laid his head open.

The eyes kept their direction and the lips moved.

On his way back Llewellyn overtook the doctor, and the two drove up together.

Howlie's hands and arms were temporarily dressed; the left one was in such a state that the doctor feared it would be permanently useless; he hoped, he said, to save the use of the other. He was young and shy, and he timidly suggested that the people were pressing too near. The sufferer had fainted again.

The showman and Llewellyn simply threw one or two off the platform. The act was sudden and had a good effect.

Soon the world came back to Howlie—a world of agony. Llewellyn bent down to him in answer to an unspoken prayer. "Parson's, Parson's," murmured the boy.

"What is it? What does he want, father?" asked Llewellyn, pity in every line of his strong face.



"Poor little fellow, he wants to go back to Crishowell instead of to the Infirmary."

The dumb look grew more intense.

Mr. Fenton seemed irresolute.

"Parson's, sir, Parson's." Tears which the pain had not brought were starting from Howlie's eyes.

"What will Lewis say? Llewellyn, do you hear?" said the Squire.

There was a pause. The blue muslin princess, who had left the platform, was being consoled by Signora Louisa inside the tent; their high-pitched chatter flowed like a thin stream behind the canvas.

"Eh, Llewellyn? Can't you answer?" said Mr. Fenton testily.

"Take him, father."

"But Lewis?"

"I'll go bail for him," replied his son.

"But who's to look after him? Who's to sit up with him? He'll want that, doctor, won't he?"

"He will," said the doctor gravely.

Howlie's eyes spoke again.

"I shall," said Llewellyn. "Father, you can spare me."

"Yes, yes. It isn't that. But where are you to live, I should like to know? Lewis' house must be full."

"Anywhere. The stable," replied his son, with decision.

"Nonsense, boy."

"You had better get him away," hazarded the doctor; "the sooner he's in bed the better."

With infinite gentleness, Llewellyn lifted Howlie and carried him to the gig.

"You must drive, father," he remarked.

A gig is not a comfortable vehicle in which to carry an injured person, and Llewellyn, who had no support for his back, had great difficulty in keeping his charge from being shaken as they drove over the cobbled streets. Howlie lay



still, but he moaned faintly now and then, and it was evident that he suffered much. Llewellyn's arms ached, one side of his face was smeared with black, and his throat was sore from the smoke ; a round blister just inside his wrist which he had not noticed before began to make itself felt, and the boy's weight seemed to rest exactly upon the spot. He made landmarks as they went, and mentally checked off each as it passed. "The crooked elm," "the turning to Brecon," "the bridge," "the laburnum tree," and so on. His father talked continually about the folly of his staying at Crishowell to nurse Howlie, but he trusted to silence, that mighty weapon which so few of us are strong enough to wield. His mind was made up, and he knew that the Vicar would uphold him.

"It's very tiresome of you, Llewellyn, going against me in this way. What am I to do, I should like to know? I haven't any one to see to the little things I chance to forget. Harry's at home, certainly, but what use is he?"

"Harry's no fool," replied his son, moved to speech by this.

"I'm not so sure, with this senseless business about Miss Ridgeway. It's all nonsense, I know," said the Squire, who was apt to treat things he disliked as if they had not occurred, "but he came bothering me about it a couple of days ago. I told him I hadn't time to talk to him, and I haven't said a word to your mother yet. I suppose *you* know all about it?"

"I thought it might happen," admitted Llewellyn.

"Then you should have told me," said Mr. Fenton, with that forgetfulness of the unwritten code of youth which comes to so many when they have left it behind. "You and Harry give me more trouble in a year than Tom and Bob have in all their lives."

For a man of recognized good character the Squire told a wonderful number of untruths.

His son smiled, but not obviously.

"Surely this niece can look after him," he continued, looking down at Howlie.



Llewellyn shook his head; his trust in Isoline was small. He had sat up many nights with sick cows and horses and he knew what it was like.

"And why not, pray?"

"Oh, she's not strong enough. She's very young, father."

"And what are you, eh?"

"Well, I'm a man, at least," said Llewellyn.

"A man!" Mr. Fenton snorted sarcastically. There was room for sarcasm, certainly, only he saw it in the wrong place.

They had passed the church and were driving up to the Vicarage gate. Mr. Lewis was standing with Isoline in the garden, while a man put up some bee-hives on a wooden trestle. That suggestiveness which surrounds a wounded figure drew his eyes to the limp-looking bundle Llewellyn held so carefully. He came forward quickly and opened the gate.

"There has been an accident," said Mr. Fenton. "It's your boy—the boy that works here."

"He's badly burnt," explained Llewellyn.

Isoline had gone into the house when she had seen who the arrivals were.

"Howell, my poor lad!" exclaimed the Vicar, coming up close to the cart. "Is he conscious?"

Howlie's voice muttered something indistinguishable.

"I don't know what you'll say, Lewis. He *would* come here. Llewellyn is responsible," said the Squire.

"Of course we will take him. How are we to get him down, Llewellyn?"

"He's rather heavy," said the young man, whose arms were stiff, "but if you would hold him while I get out, father, I might lift him."

The workman left his bee-hives, and between them they carried the sufferer in. Isoline, out of sight, watched them from over the staircase with horror in her face. Physical pain was a thing she could understand.

After some discussion, it was settled that Llewellyn should



stay and take charge of Howlie ; he would take no denial, and Mr. Fenton had to give in. The boy was to have a bed in a large spare room behind the kitchen, and Llewellyn a mattress on the floor near him. Mr. Lewis made no remonstrance when he saw how his eyes followed the young man.

"I'll take care of him entirely," said Llewellyn ; "you need have no trouble, sir. I've looked after sick things often enough. You won't mind letting me stay a day or two?"

"I should even like it," replied the Vicar, laying his hand on his shoulder.

The cook was making things ready to get Howlie to bed, and Mr. Fenton was anxious to start for home ; it was long past noon, and he had to send his son's things over from Waterchurch. The doctor, who was coming out to Crishowell, was to call late in the afternoon.

Isoline kept herself carefully out of the way ; a meeting with Mr. Fenton would be extremely awkward, and she had no desire to see Llewellyn at any time. Her uncle felt sorry for her, though he mentally applauded her good sense in remaining up-stairs, and he slipped away for a moment to tell her what had happened.

She was sitting by the window of her room as he entered, looking rather worried ; anything was unwelcome which recalled to her the entanglement of which she longed so heartily to be free. The gig stood outside at the end of the garden ; it was by no means new, and though the Squire looked carefully after everything connected with the stable, it was a shabby article. Her glance wandered over it with distaste.

She was startled by his entrance, half fearing that he had come to summon her to an interview with Mr. Fenton. She wanted time to think. She had not made up her mind whether she would see Harry again, or write to him, or whether she would ask her uncle to tell him of her decision. The latter course would be the pleasantest of the three, but there were difficulties even there.



The way Mr. Lewis had taken the matter had complicated it. He had seemed unable to imagine that an accurate knowledge of Harry's prospects could make any difference to her feelings, and if her lover should wring a consent from his father, there would be nothing she could do short of breaking with him on her own initiative. She would be able to give no reason but the real one, and that she hardly liked to do. She dared not say, "I thought you were rich, but I find you are poor, so I will not marry you."

Her uncle might certainly make the objection for her with some propriety, but how was she to ask him to do so? Though she had no love for him, a certain respect had crept into her secret soul which made her hesitate to lay it bare before his eyes; he took too much for granted. She knew that her deliverance lay in the Squire's probable disapproval, and that disapproval would make a suitable meekness becoming in herself. Meanwhile she would neither see Harry nor any one belonging to him. But it was all harassing enough. Her heart jumped as the Vicar came in.

"You may be wondering what has happened, Isoline. Poor Howell has had a dreadful accident. It seems there was a play going on at Llangarth Fair, and something caught fire; Llewellyn Fenton and he put it out together, and saved the lives of two children. Howell's hands and arms are badly burnt, brave boy that he is."

"Fancy Howell doing that! I should never have believed it of him," exclaimed the girl, whose estimate of human nature was entirely feminine. To dislike a person was to prove him incapable of a high action.

"Mr. Fenton will be gone in a few minutes. It is wise of you, my dear, to stay in your room. You are a good girl."

She did not reply, but looked out of the window. The Vicar felt rather chilled.

"You are all right up here?" he asked awkwardly.

"Yes, thank you."



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He went out. At the foot of the stairs stood the Squire, hat in hand.

"I'm off, Lewis ; it's getting late," he said.

"You don't want any talk with me?" asked the Vicar, rather surprised.

"I do, I do—but I will write," said Mr. Fenton, as he opened the front door hurriedly.



## CHAPTER XXVII

### FOUR OPINIONS

THOUGH Mr. Fenton had told the Vicar of Crishowell that he would write to him, he was in no hurry to do so. Harry's love affair was a nuisance, and he put off the consideration of it for a week, merely looking askance upon his son when he came across him. To his wife he observed that Harry was making an ass of himself, and it was not till she insisted on his telling her everything he knew that the matter was discussed.

Lady Harriet was dismayed ; she had hitherto understood her eldest son so well that his evident admiration of Miss Ridgeway had not disturbed her, for she classed her with the thousand and one other goddesses who had shed their glamour upon him at various times during the last ten years. They made a long procession, beginning with the little girls he had admired in his early school days. His safeguard, so far, had been that no one had taken him seriously.

But now he had apparently proposed to and been accepted by a young woman who knew extremely well what she was about, and one, moreover, whom his mother, with all her good sense and tolerance, had not been able to like. Putting aside the fact that she was anything but a good match for Harry, she knew that the whole atmosphere of Isoline's world was a lower one than that in which he lived. He was a man who, with the right woman, might develop much, and, with the wrong one, deteriorate as much. He was generous, loyal to a fault, and eminently lovable. He was so affectionate that disenchantment by the woman he loved would make him



suffer acutely, and he had not hardness of character enough to be able to make himself a life apart from that of his daily companions. Sorrow warps natures that have no pivot other than their own feelings ; the centre is within themselves and all the weight comes upon it. And what sorrow is there more grinding than the knowledge that what we loved was a mean thing, what we admired, an unworthy one, what we dreamed about, a poor and squalid shadow ?

There are small disenchantments in all married lives, but those who have learned to look at the whole and not at its part know their true value. The proverb says, "Straws show which way the wind blows," and, like many proverbs, it is a half-truth. Some are merely rough receipts for wisdom, made to save fools the trouble of thinking for themselves. Though small acts undeniably give clues to many things in men and women's natures, men and women cannot be judged on their evidence alone. So much goes to determine a deed beside the actual character behind it. When a man behaves unexpectedly, we call him inconsistent, because every influence which has converged on his act does not happen to tally with our private, preconceived idea of himself. But it is not so much his inconsistency as our own ignorance of things which none know clearly but the Almighty. It is the essence, the atmosphere which a character radiates, the effect it produces in those who come in close enough contact to be influenced by it, whereby a soul can be judged.

But even had he not been so much in love, Harry was far too elementary to judge Isoline rightly or wrongly ; it had never occurred to him to look down very deep into the well where Truth sits, and, had he done so, he would have understood little he saw. He would be elementary to the end of his days, and the elements were all good. Whether they would remain so with Isoline as an interpreter of life, his mother doubted.

The Squire, when he had brought himself to face the matter, raged immoderately, and his rage had the common effect of



driving his son farther than ever along the way in which he did not want him to go. They had a difficult interview, from which the young man emerged with the stormy assurance ringing in his ears that he would get nothing more than his ordinary allowance, and that, were he to marry without his father's consent, even that would be reduced. He had spoken of getting work to do, and been answered by a sneer which certainly came ill from a man who had refused to give his son a profession. They parted wrathfully.

From the smoking-room in which they had met (it was after dinner) Mr. Fenton went up to bed. Their talk had been late and continued long, and the house was still as he ascended the staircase with his lighted candle; the storm in him was subsiding into a mist of irritation through which flying glimpses of other interests began to appear. By the time he had reached his wife's bedroom door his thoughts were circling round a speech he had mapped out in the afternoon and meant to deliver at a coming tenants' dinner.

The Squire could never be driven far from his personal interests, a peculiarity which was at once his strong point and his weak one. People who make houses for themselves and live in them perpetually are among the happiest of mortals; the only drawback to their plan is, that, when they are obliged to come out, they find they have lost their eye for the country and all sense of proportion in the landscape which they are accustomed to see only from the window. Oh, that sense of proportion! If we had it completely what things might we not do? To what heights of worth and wisdom might we not attain? The man who could get a bird's-eye view of his own conduct would have no further excuse for missing perfection.

Lady Harriet's door was ajar and she pushed it further open as she heard his step; she knew what had been going on, and was waiting. He had not meant to plunge himself again in the obnoxious subject, and a look of impatience crossed his face. She stood on the threshold, brush in hand, her silver hair falling long and thick about her plain figure; the glow of the



fire behind her in the room threw up its brilliance. He entered, and they stood together on the hearth. He began to lash himself up into wrath again.

"Well?" began his wife anxiously.

"Your son is a perfect fool!" burst out Mr. Fenton, who, when displeased with his boys, was accustomed to refer to them as exclusively Lady Harriet's property.

She plied her brush, waiting.

"I did not mince matters, you may be sure. I told him my opinion of him and his nonsense, and with a few facts to back it. He won't get one extra sixpence from me—where is it to come from, I should like to know? You know that as well as I do. Young idiot! I said, 'Look here, boy, mind me. You make a fool of yourself about this girl and marry her without my consent, and I'll draw a cheque every New Year's Day for fifty pounds. That's all you'll get from me!'"

He paused.

"And what did Harry say?" inquired Lady Harriet.

"Say? What should he say? Some rubbish about getting work. Work indeed! I should like to see Harry work. I laughed at that. 'My dear young man,' I said, 'you aren't fit to work; you've been an idler all your life. What you boys are coming to, I don't know.'"

"I sometimes think," said his wife reflectively, "that perhaps you made a mistake when you would not let him go into the army, Edward."

"Pshaw! What nonsense! Really, one might think you were on his side."

"I dislike Miss Ridgeway, and should dislike beyond all to see him married to her. Have you written to Mr. Lewis?"

"Why should I write to Lewis?"

"You said you meant to," replied she.

"How can I write? I can't say to Lewis, 'Your niece is not good enough,' can I?"

"There is nothing of that sort necessary. The money ques-  
s



tion alone is sufficient. Why not write to-morrow, Edward? We ought to do something."

"I must go to Presteign to-morrow. I shall have no time for letters. I think it would be the best plan if you went over to Crishowell in the phaëton, for then you could see Lewis yourself. Yes, that will do very well."

And Mr. Fenton took up his candle and went into his dressing-room.

While her husband was on his way to Presteign next day Lady Harriet ordered the phaëton. In more prosperous days this vehicle had run behind a pair of well-matched fourteen-hand grey ponies, but these had been swept away along with many other things on the tide of economy, and a strong, elderly cob, accustomed to odd jobs, replaced them. The old servant who sat behind was thinking much of these departed glories as they trotted along, and wondered, noticing the care on his mistress' face, whether she was remembering them too. But it was the future that weighed on her rather than the past.

She did not look forward to her errand, and the feeling that it was not hers by right made it all the more disagreeable. She stayed herself up by thinking that with no one could she enter on a difficult subject so well as with the Vicar.

Her sincere hope was that she would not be called upon to see Isoline. Though she was so completely out of sympathy with her, she had that pity for the struggles, the hopes, the blank, black despairs of youth, the desperate straits of those who stand *in front* of the defences of experience, that she dreaded the trouble she was bringing her. Poor though these defences are, the young have to do without them. We are apt to forget that. But she might have spared herself.

Llewellyn was still at Crishowell. Howlie was making steps towards recovery, but he had suffered cruelly and was very weak, and though the doctor thought better of his injuries than he had done at first, hoping to save the use of both his hands, it was a slow business. His dependence on Llewellyn was absolute, and the old woman who came in daily



from the village to keep the sick boy's room in order being useless for any other purpose, the Vicar wondered what he should have done without him.

Isoline had been down once or twice to see Howlie, but her visits had scarcely been profitable. As he began to get some relief from pain his usual nature also began to re-assert itself, and the expression which flitted on his face as he stared at her—which he always did—gave her a sensation of not being appreciated. It was during one of these visits that the wheels of Lady Harriet's phaëton were heard stopping at the gate, and Llewellyn, who had gone to look out, put his head in at the door.

The slim, white figure sitting very upright by the bed turned in inquiry.

"It is my mother," said Llewellyn. "You would like to see her, Howlie, wouldn't you? She is sure to come down."

He disappeared in the direction of Lady Harriet's voice.

Isoline made good her escape and slipped out through the kitchen and up into her room, her face flushing.

She knew very well that her uncle had been expecting a letter from Mr. Fenton daily, and would not let his visitor go without reference to it; he had been rather annoyed by the silence. She would not be dragged into it if she could help it, and, as she was unable to act until the Squire's decision had been heard, there was no object in facing a needless trial. She snatched up her hat and ran down-stairs, across the orchard, down by the brookside and over the bridge. On it she paused a moment, then, reflecting that she was barely out of earshot, turned up into the fields through which Harry had chased Rebecca.

Lady Harriet had quick feelings, and they were always stirred by acts such as the one which had cost poor Howlie so much. She sat with him for some time, leaving behind her, when she went, a basket of things the like of which he had never tasted. He made an attempt to put up his hand to his forelock, which resulted in a twinge of pain.



The Vicar was waiting for her outside, and they strolled into the garden.

"Perhaps you have something to say to me, Lady Harriet," he remarked.

"Yes," she replied. "My husband had business to-day, and he and I—he couldn't come himself. Mr. Lewis, I hope you will not be annoyed at my news, but this marriage is impossible. You know, I am sure, that we are anything but well off, and he says he cannot afford to do anything for Harry."

"I know, I know," said the Vicar.

"I am very sorry," she went on, "sorry if I am hurting you, my friend, sorry for my boy, for he seems bent upon it, and sorry for your niece too."

"Do not think of me," said he, "and do not suppose that I cannot understand Mr. Fenton's feelings. You have every right to expect Harry to make a much better marriage; and, even were it not so, I cannot quite feel that they are suited. I sometimes doubt if they would be happy."

"Will she be very much distressed?" inquired Lady Harriet. "I know her so little. But one hates to give pain to people, especially young people who hope so much from life."

"I hardly know her better than you do, that is the truth."

"She seems a very unlikely niece for you to have," said his companion, after a pause.

Mr. Lewis smiled. "I very often do not understand her," he said, with a sigh.

"Do you think I ought to see her?" hazarded she, throwing herself upon the point she dreaded; "it seems so unkind not to say a word to her." "What shall I do?"

She stopped short in their walk.

The Vicar did not know what to say. He had been unable to get any response to his own sympathy when Isoline had wept at breakfast, but he thought that perhaps another woman might help her when he could not. Then he remembered that she had said she did not care for Lady Harriet. He was puzzled.



"I will find her," he said, "but if she feels she cannot speak about it, you will understand, will you not?"

"Poor child, of course. If you knew how I hate this, Mr. Lewis!"

He went into the house and she returned to Howlie's room. Isoline was not to be found anywhere. He went all over the Vicarage, into the orchard, down to the brook, and, finally, gave up the search.

"I do not know where Isoline is," said he, as he stood by Howlie's bedside. "I have looked everywhere."

The window fronted towards the water and the fields; the sill was low and Howlie could see over it into the green beyond.

"Oi seed 'er 'alf-an-hour ago," said he, "slinkin' out an' up into they meadows. Goin' fast she was too, for 'er."

"Are you sure it was Miss Ridgeway?" inquired the Vicar.

"S'pose oi am. There ain't many round 'ere 'as theire noses in the air loike miss."

Llewellyn bit his lip.

"She has evidently gone off for a long walk," explained Mr. Lewis, rather embarrassed. "She has taken to it so much since she has been here, and I have encouraged it."

"It is such a great thing when girls like it," responded Lady Harriet, anxious to say something pleasant; "I have always thought they are kept too much in the house."

She was so much relieved that she could have given thanks to Heaven aloud.

"It's a funny thing miss didn't want to see the loidy," observed Howlie to Llewellyn after the phaëton had rolled away. Since his illness he had become very much at home with the young man.

"Does she like visitors?" inquired Llewellyn, with a view of drawing him out.

"She don't like yew," said Howlie.

"How do you know?"

Howlie looked infinitely subtle, as subtle as a person with a rabbit mouth can look—but took no notice of the question.



"She loikes the young general, though."

"Who?" asked his companion, with much interest.

"Yewre brother. 'Im as is with the soljers an' comes 'ere now an' again. Oi saw them coming down the fields the other day. They'd been sitting up by the cherry-tree. 'E was lookin' at 'er soime as father looks at a jug o' beer after e's dug six foot of a groive."

"You talk too much, boy," observed Llewellyn, with an attempt at dignity.

"Oi don't, mostly. But oi 'aven't no objection to talkin' to yew," said Howlie reassuringly.

"Miss is a rare one," he began again, "can't moike nothin' out of 'er. One day she'll be off walkin' an' not get 'ome till dark an' long after. 'Nother day, if Parson do call 'er to come out i' the orchard, she'll go steppin' loike a turkey i' the long grass. 'Froid of 'er dress, looks loike, an' yet oi've seed 'er come back with 'er petticoats scram-full o' broiers an' mud."

"Well, she knows her own business best and it's none of ours," said Llewellyn, inwardly curious and outwardly correct.


"Yewre roight there. She knows 'er own moind, she does. Moy! she was pleased when she went wi' Parson to Waterchurch, an' yew should a' seen 'er when she come back, too. Nothin' weren't good enough for 'er. Ye'd a' thought the 'ouse was a work'ouse, an' me an' cook an' Parson was the paupers in it, she was that 'oigh wi' us."

Llewellyn turned his back. He did not want to laugh, yet his mouth widened in spite of him.

"Now, stop talking," he said, "you've had enough excitement to-day and you'll get tired."

"She's after the young general," added Howlie coarsely.

But his information was not up to date.





## CHAPTER XXVIII

### A MARTYR

ISOLINE was panting when she arrived at the top of the field behind Crishowell Vicarage. She sat for a time to rest, looking down at the cherry-tree whose blossoms were beginning to strew the grass beneath it. It was a still day and she could hear her uncle's voice calling her name from the orchard. She rose and flitted along the hedge like a wild bird. Before her, the Twmpa's shoulder rose out of the green plateau, restful and solid. Even to her unresponsive mind it suggested peace and a contrast to the worries on which she had just turned her back. The whole afternoon was before her; she needed no excuse for absenting herself. Had the Vicar not applauded her for remaining unseen when Mr. Fenton had appeared the week before? Lady Harriet would start for home fairly early if she wished to get to Waterchurch by a reasonable hour, and she knew that her uncle had visits that would take him out as soon as the guest had left. The day was her own and the Pedlar's Stone was over there in its place a couple of miles away; as the sun declined the little hollow below the sheltering brushwood would have its waiting, watching occupant. It was Wednesday, too, which, inasmuch as it was one of Mr. Lewis' visiting days in the direction of the Wye, she often spent at the trysting-place. She was harassed, and she felt that Rhys would put her troubles temporarily out of her head.

She lingered on the plateau, scanning the long expanse of green for sign of a human figure, and, seeing none, pressed forward, and turned down into the ill-famed bit of ground.



She passed the stone and approached the little hollow from a different direction, stepping so softly on the short turf that Rhys did not hear her footstep. She stood looking down. His back was turned to her as he sat, and he was gazing intently at something in his hand. While she looked he carried it to his lips again and again. As he did so she made a slight movement.

He sprang up, and seeing her, dropped his treasure, and came up the side of the hollow to meet her. She recognized a little daguerreotype of herself that she had once given him.

"Is that the way you treat my picture, Mr. Kent?" she exclaimed, the little playful gaiety which so attracted him returning to her with his presence.

"Don't say, 'Mr. Kent.' Why will you never call me by my name?" said Rhys.

"I do not know it, you see."

"I mean my Christian name, Rh——Robert."

She looked at him smiling, without answering; he gazed back at her, feasting his eyes.

"Well, what have you to say?" said she at last.

"I love you," said he.

"But you have told me that many, many times before," she observed.

"I am never tired of telling you, Isoline."

"Perhaps I am tired of hearing it."

"But you can't really hate it, or you would not come," he replied without tact.

"Do not be too sure. You cannot even guess what made me come to-day."

"Tell me."

It always pleased Isoline to see how completely she could work upon Rhys; the very name of another man on her lips was poison to him. Also she was really perturbed herself and felt that sympathy would be supporting.

"I have been very much disturbed," she began; "a gentleman has asked me to marry him."



Rhys felt as if some one had taken up an arrow and shot it straight into his heart. The stab was almost physical.

"Who is it?" he asked thickly.

"Do not look so wild. It is young Mr. Fenton of Waterchurch Court."

His lips were trying to frame a question, but he had not the courage to utter it. She smiled.

"I do not mean to marry him."

For answer he caught her hand and covered it with kisses.

"Please stop!" she cried, "or I cannot tell you anything. Do be reasonable, Mr. Kent!"

"You will not marry him! You cannot! Oh, Isoline, promise me! promise me! Do not take away your hand. I will not let you go till you say you do not care for him."

"Have I not told you that I mean to refuse him?"

"What? You have not done it yet?" cried Rhys, "and you said he had asked you! What have you done? What have you done?"

Isoline was a little ruffled; there was so much she wished to tell him and so much that she dared not tell him, that she was finding it difficult to steer between the two.

"He asked my uncle," she said hastily.

"What did he say to him?"

"Oh, my uncle wishes me to do as I like, and, of course, I could not think of it. He is so poor that he never should have dreamed of such a thing."

"Poor devil, I suppose he could not help it," said Rhys, feeling almost kindly towards Harry now that he knew there was no danger.

It is difficult to imagine what Walters proposed to himself in the future, or how far he looked beyond the actual present. His higher imagination once awakened, he attributed to Isoline every high quality, and, like Harry, he mistook her inability to respond to emotion for an intense purity of mind. So did he worship her, so far did he deem her above him in every virtue, that she was as safe with him in this lonely place as if



she had been in the sitting-room of her uncle's house. What could be the end he scarcely allowed himself to think. Even were he at home, reinstated, he could not suppose that she would stoop down to him, and as he was a penniless outcast, with no prospect of anything but exile at best, his position was hopeless. Every day that he stayed where he was he risked the little that was left him, but he barely thought of that; he only knew that separation from her would mean shipwreck.

In spite of the airs of sophistication she gave herself, Isoline was very innocent of the forces that actually sway mankind. Shrewdness she had, and a very distinct determination to further her own interests, but her knowledge was what might be called a drawing-room knowledge; it had no cognizance of the larger things of life. Her dreams began and ended with visions of new dresses, good position, power in small ways, admiration—still of a drawing-room sort—and little likes and dislikes. Of large hates and loves and hopes, abstract principles, of the only things to be dignified by the name of real life, she had no idea. Natures like hers are more safely guarded from the greater temptations than are the salt of the earth, for these may fall and rise again higher, but, for such as Isoline, there is neither rising nor falling.

It was seldom that her life had presented such a difficulty to her as it did now. She was certain that Harry would make a determined effort to see her, and she would give a great deal to be spared the ordeal. She had eluded his father and to-day she had eluded his mother, but she thought, rightly enough, that it would be a much more difficult thing to elude him. Had her aunt been in Hereford she would have begged to be allowed to return to her, but Miss Ridgeway's health had not improved, and, a few days before, she had received the news that her stay abroad would be indefinite.

There was one friend in the city from whom she might ask the favour of a refuge, and she had made up her mind, as she pursued her way to the meeting-place, to suggest the plan to



her uncle, and, with his permission, leave Crishowell for a time. If this could be settled she would depart as soon as her friend could take her.

Harry's proximity had once made the place endurable, but now that it had become an actual disadvantage, she was only too ready to go. She would be glad to get back for a little to the diversions and society of a town. There would be no mysterious admirer to amuse her, but in all probability she would see Rhys again on her return, and even if she did not—well, it would not make so very much difference. She was beginning to be a little embarrassed by his demonstrative devotion, and his clothes had looked so shabby of late, that the possibilities with which she had endowed him at first were fading into the commonplace. Hereford would be a relief. She was a good deal disenchanted with things generally.

They parted that evening only a few paces from the stone. The days were long and light now, and he could not go with her more than a few yards from its neighbourhood as he had been wont to do in early spring. It was only as they said good-bye that she told him of her possible departure.

Poor Rhys, it was a blow ; but the thought that it was struck to escape Harry's importunities softened it a great deal. Her absence would not be a long one, she assured him, so he let her go with a sigh and went back to his hiding-place in the hollow.

Isoline hurried along homewards. She was longing to see her uncle, and to hear what Lady Harriet had said, for she knew very well that it was not alone the wish to see Howlie which had brought her. She was anxious to get his consent to her departure as soon as possible and write to her Hereford friend, for the moment she should receive that lady's invitation she would start. It was unfortunate that she could not get it for a few days to come, for Harry would be sure to make trouble before she could set off. Everything was most trying.

She walked into the Vicarage to find Mr. Lewis in his study.



"You have had a long walk," he said, looking at her over the top of his book.

"Yes," she replied, "I have been up near the foot of the mountain."

"I called for you once or twice ; Lady Harriet Fenton was here, and she asked to see you, but you had gone."

"Oh, did you, uncle ?"

"Poor child," said the old man, taking off his glasses and laying down his book, "it has been very hard for you, I know."

"Did she say anything about me, uncle ?"

"She did. I am afraid, my little girl, I have not very pleasant news for you. Mr. Fenton is not going to make any provision for Harry which would enable him to marry. In fact, he cannot afford to do it. And such being the case, he will not give his consent."

She looked out of the window at the fading light.

"Then I suppose there is nothing to be done," she said, taking up her hat, which she had laid upon a chair as she came in.

He had not expected such entire and unprotesting submission, and he was rather surprised ; he watched her as she went to the door, rather expecting to see her composure give some sign of wavering. She paused, her fingers on the handle.

"Uncle," she began, "I wish I could go away from here for a little."

"It would not be a bad plan," said he, after a moment's thought, "but what can we do ? Your aunt is away, you see, and there seems no prospect of her coming back."

"There is Mrs. Johnson. Could I not go to her ? There was an idea of my staying there before it was arranged that I should come here. She has often invited me. You know her, uncle. Could you not ask her to take me for a short time ? I want to get away, indeed I do."

The Vicar thought that he detected emotion in her voice.

"Isoline, are you very unhappy about this ? You say so



little, my dear. I am so sorry for you, and I wish I could help you."

"I can bear anything if I can only get away," said the girl.

"Well, I will write," said he, "I believe you are acting wisely."

"And ask her to let me come as soon as possible. I feel—I think—the change will be good. And I do not want to see any one, or to talk about what has happened. I need not, uncle, need I? Mr. Harry Fenton will not come here, will he?" Her voice trembled a little.

"Come here, child," said he, holding out his hand, "and do not be afraid to speak out. You are going away to avoid seeing Harry again, are you not?"

A direct question demands a direct answer, and she hardly felt prepared to give one; she did not know to what it might commit her. She hesitated.

"I had rather not see him," she said at last, slipping her hand out of the Vicar's; "must I do it?"

"Well, I think so, if he wishes it," he said slowly; "you are certainly doing sensibly in taking Mr. Fenton's refusal of consent as final, for, in marrying, you would be condemning yourself to a life of poverty which you are not fitted to endure. But, though you now wish to free yourself, remember that you accepted Harry. If he wants to hear your decision from your own lips, I think he has a right to do so."

"But why should he?" she asked plaintively, "surely he can believe you when you tell him, uncle?"

"Surely, my dear, if you ever loved him at all, you will understand how he feels."

"I think it will be very inconsiderate of him if he comes here and makes a fuss when he knows it is impossible."

"People are sometimes inconsiderate when they are in trouble—young people especially."

"Then they ought not to be so," replied Isoline, with decision.

She was accustomed to carry about little moral precepts to



protect her from difficulties, as other people carried umbrellas to protect them from the rain. When the difficulties came down undeserved upon her head, she would take one out and unfurl it, so to speak.

Mr. Lewis smiled faintly; he had some perception of ironies.

"Do you not think that *you* are being a little inconsiderate? You may be in trouble, but somehow I do not fancy your trouble is so great as Harry's."

His voice had meaning in the last part of his sentence.

A look of dislike shot at him which was hidden by the dusk pervading the room.

"Then I must see him?" she said.

"You can do as you like," said the Vicar, returning to his book, "but I think you ought to."

As the door closed behind her he reflected that he had never before come so near to understanding his niece.

Isoline ran up to her room, controlling herself with difficulty as she went; when she reached the door she darted in and locked it.

"Every one is against me—every one!" she sobbed as she sat down upon the bed.



## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE HALF LOAF

HARRY was in a terrible state. Nevertheless, though he kept carefully out of his father's way, he poured out the tumult of his heart to his mother, for she had told him of her visit to Crishowell, encouraging him to talk, and thinking it better that he should have some sort of safety-valve. And talk he did.

Late that night he was pacing about in her dressing-room, that dressing-room which was so often the goal of those who sought to ease their souls. The Squire fumed there, Harry brought various sporting interests for discussion, and Llewellyn would steal up from the smoking-room to thrash out farm perplexities. Bob and Tom, with their regiments in India, found their minds turning sometimes to that particular spot. The carpet was worn and threadbare, worn with the coming and going of many feet.

To give up Isoline simply never entered Harry's head, and, had he been inclined to do so, the opposition he met with would have sufficed to keep his constancy alight. Again and again did he assure Lady Harriet that he would never, never change, breaking between his assurances into rhapsodies over the beauties and graces of his beloved. He heard from her that she had not seen Isoline at the Vicarage, and that though Mr. Lewis had held by the Squire's decision, he had said nothing about his niece's feelings. He was not disquieted on that score, for he did not dream that she would not reflect his



own fidelity like a mirror. How could she, having made him such a gift, take it back at the first breath of adversity? To think of such a thing was to insult her.

For himself he had no misgivings. It was hard, but what others had done he could do; he could wait, and he would. As soon as he had been to Crishowell—and he meant to go there next day—he would be off to London, where he might cast about for work and take his place among the bread-winners of the world. These intentions in a youth educated to no special calling hardly seemed so absurd then as they would now, for there were more snug places into which an impecunious young gentleman could be hoisted in those days, and he had many influential friends.

Lady Harriet did not try to turn him from any of these resolutions, and she kissed him with special tenderness as they said good-night, but her heart sank in her, for she saw that he stood between the devil and the deep sea. There was that in his face which told her that he was harder held this time than he had been by any of his former devotions. To lose his love would go ill with him no doubt, but to win her might even go worse. She went to bed weary in mind and body and with no zest for the morning; the household seemed out of joint, and she missed Llewellyn.

Harry reached Crishowell Vicarage next day to find Howlie sitting in an easy-chair at the foot of the garden. He had been allowed to go out for the first time, and was installed near the fence, where he could see the passers-by and talk to strolling acquaintances. His face lit up with interest as he recognized the approaching rider.

"Oi can't 'old the 'orse for yew this toime," he said, raising his bandaged arms as his friend dismounted.

He had never wavered in his allegiance to Harry; though Llewellyn had tended him, fed him, and stayed him up in his hours of suffering, though he depended upon him, trusted him, and had remarked to the cook that he was a "rare good one," it was "the young general" who had his admiration and whose



image had never been eclipsed by the younger brother's more solid qualities.

"S'pose yew be come to see miss?" he observed, when the inquiries about the burnt hands were over.

Harry did not answer.

"Where is Mr. Llewellyn?" he asked.

"Gone out. 'E says 'e's goin' 'ome to-morrow."

"You will be sorry, I expect," said Harry.

"Oi believe yew. Oi loike 'im an' 'e loikes me an' Parson, though 'e don't think much o' miss. Be yew come to see 'er?"

"Is she at home?" asked the young man, ignoring the other's persistence.

"Settin' up in 'er room."

At this moment Harry looked up and saw the face of Isoline for an instant at the window; it disappeared immediately, but not before the two pairs of eyes had met.

Vexation stood in the feminine pair as its owner drew back her head; she had been tempted to look out by the sound of the voices below, and in that instant her unwelcome lover had seen her. She had spent a great deal of time up-stairs that day, her ears strained for any sound of an arrival. She wore her walking-boots and her hat lay within reach, so that she might run out as she had done before. It was not perhaps the most ennobling way of meeting a difficulty, but it had the merit of being extremely safe.

For very shame she could not escape now. She grew quite hot, anger with herself for her carelessness, with circumstances, with her uncle, all welled up in her, and gave her some of the feelings that a rat must have when there is nothing but the bare corner behind him and a dog in front.

Harry went up to the house and found the Vicar in the orchard.

"I expected you," said the old man as the young one began rapidly to explain his presence.

"Mr. Lewis, let me see Isoline."

The Vicar took him by the arm. "You had much better



not, believe me," he said; "it will do no good, Harry, and it will give you both pain."

"If you think I will ever consent to give her up, you mistake me. You believe you are doing right, I know, but it is no use, sir. I love her and she loves me, and we will never let anything divide us."

The Vicar looked into the honest, excited face, a face full of trust without misgiving or concealment.

"I must see her, sir, indeed I must," Harry continued. "If you were I, you would say the same."

"If I were you," said the Vicar, "I should do exactly as you are doing. I haven't always been an old man, and I sometimes fear I have never been a wise one. You can see her, Harry, but if you would only accept this quietly you would spare yourself. She will tell you what I am telling you now; she is an obedient girl, and she knows what your father and I think."

The colour died out of Harry's face.

"You mean that she will give me up?" he exclaimed.

"She has told me that she will not engage herself without my consent."

A cold, intangible fear, like a breath from the inevitable, hovered round Harry for a moment, but he would not realize the shock it gave him.

"She thinks herself that you had better not meet," added the Vicar, averting his look and fixing it on a bough where the last blossoms lingered in a ragged brown cluster; the bloom was almost over, and every puff of wind scattered the grass with withering petals.

"But I can't go without a word. Oh, let me see her! Beg her to speak to me, Mr. Lewis. I saw her at the window as I came in. It is only for a moment—it is so little to ask."

"Well, if you must, I will tell her. Oh, Harry, Harry, but you have made a mistake!" exclaimed the Vicar, unable to repress himself entirely as he turned away.

"I suppose Mr. Fenton wants to see me," said Miss Ridge-



way as she came down, her face set, in obedience to the summons.

"He does, and you must see him," he replied, with decision. "Go into my study and I will send him there."

She went in, her nostrils quivering; the unfairness of the world had never been so plain to her.

"Dearest," cried Harry, when he had shut the door behind him, "it isn't true, is it? You can't mean to break with me altogether?"

He came closer to her, and took her two hands; they were quite cold.

"Your father has refused his consent," she said, with a little drawing back of her head, "and so has my uncle."

He let the hands fall.

"And so it is all over?" he said almost breathlessly.

"It is not my fault. What can I do?"

She had entered the room feeling that it would be a simple matter to cut the cord without remorse, for it seemed to her that Harry had cheated her, and her sense of justice smarted. She had shrunk from seeing him, but being forced to do so, she would have small compunction. Now it surprised her to find that her resolution was hardly what it had been before she saw him, they had not met since the day she had accepted him, and his actual presence began to affect her a little. Things are so easy when we rehearse them with only ourselves for audience, but they have a hideous knack of complicating themselves when the curtain is up and the play begins. Isoline realized with a pang that she liked him very much—more than she had remembered, in fact.

"And so you do not care for me after all," he said, looking at her with eyes in which tears had gathered in spite of his efforts to keep them back.

"It is not that," faltered she.

"What is it then? Can't you wait for me? Can't you trust me? It will all come right in the end if we only have patience," said the man, who was surely one of the least appropriate



apostles of patience in the kingdom. "I can work. I shall have to go to London and see what I can get to do. I would do *anything* for you, Isoline, darling. It would not matter if we began in a humble way, would it, once we had something settled to go upon? We should be much, much happier than many who are rich."

It was hardly the picture to move her.

"But your father will not help you."

"No, he won't. I should have to depend entirely upon my work. If I marry without his consent, he says he will give me fifty pounds a year—not even what I have now. But, once I am married and working for myself, I hardly think he will keep to that. It's a risk, I know. But I would run any risk, dear. Perhaps it isn't fair to ask you to do it, though," he added, with a sigh. "Isoline, you can never love me as I love you."

"It is unkind of you to speak like that," said she, with an attractive little note of dignity; "if you are in trouble, so am I."

He took her hand again with an exclamation of self-reproach; one of her most useful weapons was her aptitude for making other people feel themselves in the wrong.

"Dearest, I forget everything but my own unhappiness," he said penitently.

"It is really dreadful," exclaimed Isoline. "How happy I was the day that you came here, and now it is all spoilt!"

"But it can never be spoilt as long as we love each other," cried he. "Isoline, darling, only be true to me, and some day we shall be together."

"I can't promise anything. How can I when my uncle forbids it?"

Poor Harry, beating against the door that never resisted, yet never opened, felt helpless. But he gathered himself together.

"Then let us do without promising," he urged, "only tell me this. If anything should happen to make it possible—if I get on—will you let me come back? I shall never lose hope



if you do not forget me, and I can feel there is a chance still."

It is easy enough to promise to remember any one, and this arrangement struck her as very suitable ; it was, in other words, almost what she would have proposed herself, for she liked Harry. She assented readily.

When they parted he went out to the Vicar, who was still in the orchard.

"Good-bye," he said, holding out his hand, "I am glad I saw her after all. I am much happier now."

And he left the old man wondering at the hopefulness on his face.

Presently Isoline stepped out, cool and dainty, into the greenness of the orchard.

"I have told him that I cannot bind myself without your consent, uncle," she said in her clear voice. And the Vicar wondered more.

As for Harry, he turned his head towards Waterchurch with a not unhappy heart. Certainly his interview had not been all that he had hoped, but he was brave, and a settled purpose upholds a man much. And, as we all know, half a loaf is better than no bread.



## CHAPTER XXX

### NANNIE SEES HER DUTY

ALTHOUGH the Pig-driver, as he sat in his cart at Llangarth Fair, was mainly concerned with the prospective beef, mutton, and pork collected before him, he found time to notice other things. One of these was George Williams, steering his way through the crowd with Mary Vaughan's arm in his.

He looked after them as they passed, all unconscious of his eyes, and, when they were lost in the mass of human beings and had disappeared from the range of his vision, he still remained in so pre-occupied a state that his bargains were in danger of suffering.

It was evident that his former dependent "had a young woman"; a result, no doubt, of his prosperity at Great Masterhouse; perhaps he would soon be setting up a home of his own, perhaps he was even buying things at the fair for his wedding.

For years James Bumpett had known no shame, but the nearest approach to it assailed him as he saw Williams, well-dressed, happy, and evidently with his private affairs on hand, a living witness to the limits of his own power.

The thought hit him in a spot in which most of us are vulnerable. People who love power may be sublime, to others as well as to themselves, so long as they are able to get it; when they are not, they become ridiculous, principally to others. His business done, he drove away, plunged in his own thoughts. How he wished that the high-and-mighty mistress of Great Masterhouse had been in the fair to see her favourite servant



walking about with the girl who had led her only son astray. Not that the Pig-driver thought much of such deviations from the straight path as Rhys had made, but he knew that Mrs. Walters did. The idea of her at a fair was so impossible that he smiled at his own futility ; but she should know of it, and the next time he met Nannie Davis he would take care that she heard of George's doings.

Nannie did not like Williams, her admiration being given to more lively characters. Her own youth had been cheerful, to say the least of it, and she despised those who lost their opportunities in that way. His gravity and quietness annoyed her, and the high place he had taken in Mrs. Walters' estimation made her jealous. Her personal devotion was not given so much to her mistress as to the family she had served so long, but she could not away with the notion of any one else being important to it.

This did not escape Bumpett ; he had known Nannie all her life, and they had always been on friendly terms ; besides which, their common knowledge of Rhys' presence in the country had brought them a good deal together.

But chance happened to keep them apart at this moment, and the neighbourhood of the farm had become so abhorrent to him ever since his errand there, that he hesitated to go near the place. Rhys was the only person to whom he had related the affair ; he hated even to think of it, and when he at last met the old woman casually in Crishowell village, the news he longed to impart had been burning within him for three weeks.

To do him justice, the Pig-driver's methods in the matter were not coarse. He did not suggest that Nannie should tell Mrs. Walters straight out, but he worked so adroitly upon her feeling that he left her well assured of success. It was clear by her face that she was aching and longing to have a fling at Williams, that upstart, that interloper, and—worst of all sinners to the uneducated mind—that man who kept himself to himself.



The two women stood by the duck-pond. The birds were collected round the brink, waddling and gobbling in the soft bits of mud, and Mrs. Walters was pointing out those she had selected for killing. A large white drake straddled cumbrously about among the members of his family. Inside Nannie's apron, which she had gathered with one hand into a kind of sack, a fat one, predestined to death, quacked and complained in a voice so lamentable that the mistress had to shout her directions in order to make the servant understand.

"Can't 'ear ye!" bawled Nannie, "so long as this 'ere thief do go on as he do!"

"Take up the brown one there—no, no—that one by the stone!" cried Anne, pointing to a young mallard who stood motionless, his dully critical eye staring, unconscious of wrath to come, upon his companions.

The old woman stooped and made a dive with her hand towards the mallard, and the duck in her apron lifted up its voice and floundered with all its strength.

"Drat ye!" exclaimed Nannie, giving it a vicious pinch and missing her prey, which, with a calm look, sailed into the water, wagging its tail.

"Tut, tut," said Mrs. Walters, coming nearer, "give the bird to me and you go and try to drive the mallard back on to the grass. I must have him."

Nannie's eye fell on an old wooden box lying open near, and thrusting the duck into it, she turned it over with her foot. The air rang with its outcries. Then she picked up a branch and advanced along the brink to the spot nearest to her quarry. He took little apparent interest until she came level with him, when, with a twirl of his leg, he put an extra yard or so between them.

"Shoo! shoo!" cried Mrs. Walters from the shore.

"That ain't no good, mum!" exclaimed Nannie, pushing back her sunbonnet with a large gesture; "if ye'd let fly at 'im wi' that gob o' mud beside ye 'e might take more notice o' ye."



Anne picked up a clod and threw it into the pond. The duck merely turned upside down and became a simple cone in the water with three small feathers in the apex. The attitude had a suggestion of insult.

Nannie beat the branch up and down on the surface of the pond, muttering words under her breath which, had they reached her mistress, would have done her no good. The effect it had was that of disquieting the others, and they began to steal away across the grass in a solemn string, protest in every line of their feathers and every movement of their ungainly feet. The mallard looked after them for a moment and began to swim round and round the pool.

"I have no more time to waste," said Anne Walters impatiently; "you had better call Williams; I see him in the garden."

George was very cheerful; he was whistling at his work, and he had a pleasant sense of things being all right. The clouds rode along over his head, white masses of packed snow, cut sharp against the blue, and steering their course through the endless ether like great galleons advancing, unconquered and unconquerable. A lark was losing itself in a tremor of melody, a little vanishing spot. It struck him that the world was good.

He had seen Mary once or twice since the fair, and, though his heart burned within him at keeping silence from the words he might not speak, he felt he was gaining ground; at least, he had got her respect again, and he had seen, entering the shop a few days since, a look of unmistakable pleasure in her face as she greeted him. Yes, things were looking up, and the garden, into which he had put so many hours of steady work, was beginning to repay him.

George was in his element in a garden, though he was himself unconscious of the fact. He had an intense sympathy with growth and life, vegetable and animal, and a large sense of protectorship. As he paused a moment, looking critically at a lush corner where the scarlet-runners had engulfed the fence, he might have stood for the modern version of the original



Adam, the natural culmination of the Spirit of Life, moving, not on the waters, but on the fields. All he wanted was Eve; Eve, who, at that moment, was standing in a similar environment, behind the little stack of green vegetables piled on the counter before her. Her surroundings were a little more complicated, that was all, but when were a woman's otherwise?

Williams left the garden at Nannie's call, and she watched him with a sour face as Mrs. Walters directed him to catch the mallard.

"I'll get 'im easy enough," said he; "there's no use in driving 'im. Them ducks always follow their own kind. Go we a bit out o' the way, an' I'll be bound he'll be on dry land afore we've got far."

They retreated from the pond, and the bird ceased his gyrations, only fixing a wary eye on their departing figures. After consideration, he made for the spot where the rest had landed, and set out on their track, the violence of his efforts causing him to roll from side to side like a ship in a storm. When he was well out on his course, the old woman pounced upon him and bore him struggling to the box.

"Williams is a sensible man," observed Anne, as she looked after George's disappearing back. "I did well when I took him. There is a Providence over all our acts, little as we think it sometimes."

Nannie looked sarcastic.

"Under God, I may have done a good work," continued her mistress, who was unused to having her words disregarded. The leavening of self in them took nothing from their sincerity.

"That's as may be," replied Nannie, with her nose in the air.

Mrs. Walters looked at her as one might look at a child who has pitted its opinion against that of an elder.

"Williams is leading a new life. He has put the old man from him."

"Yes, he! he! And he've taken a young woman in 'is



place," leered Nannie, whose flippancy occasionally got the better of her awe of Anne.

"What do you mean?" inquired her companion.

"Ye can't see everything that happens in the world from Masterhouse," she replied enigmatically.

"I don't know what you mean by talking like that," said Anne, drawing herself up.

"There's some that's mighty different to what they look. I could tell a thing or two about that Williams if I liked. Not that it's for *me* to speak," said the old woman.

Anne was not without curiosity.

"What do you know against him?" she asked, after a pause.

"He's a soft one, is Williams; but I know 'im. It's 'yes, mum' here and 'yes, mum' there up this way, but down at Llangarth 'tis another story. Rollin' about at fairs with a hussy that's no better than she should be. I can't do wi' they mealy-mouthed chaps; they've always got the devil's tail tucked away somewhere in their breeches."

Mrs. Walter's face darkened. Nannie went on, encouraged.

"As proud as Punch he was, too. An' she goin' about without shame, holding his arm like the gentry."

"Who told you this?"

It was on the tip of Nannie's tongue to say, "The Pig-driver," but she suddenly bethought her of the one occasion on which he had come to the farm. She had hovered about at the kitchen-door that day and had heard the scene enacted inside it. She knew very well that her mistress had but scant respect for James Bumpett.

Anne repeated her question.

"Oh, I heard in Crishowell about his goings-on. Fine talk he's made there, an' no mistake."

"You are much too fond of gossip," said Mrs. Walters judicially.

"'Tis no gossip. 'Tis my plain duty, an' no more. If folks down Crishowell way be sayin' what a mawk you be to have



picked up such a bad bit o' stuff, I'll let ye know it, an' no more than Christian too. Not that I wasn't ashamed to hear them speakin' such low words about ye, knowin' that 'twas a holy act ye thought to do. But we're all deceived sometimes."

And Nannie stooped, sighing, to take up the imprisoned ducks.

Anne stood contemplating the mixture of fiction and truth served up to her. She wished to dismiss it all with contempt, but the thought of her acts being criticized was too much for her. Criticism spelt outrage to her temperament.

She turned away towards the house, internally fevered. The ducks squalled in Nannie's grasp as they were carried to the outhouse which was to be their condemned cell. Their jailer hurried along; she had no idea of leaving her work half done.

"Where be I to put them?" she cried above the din.

Mrs. Walters pointed to a door without stopping. The old woman flung it open and deposited her burden. As she shut them up, Anne turned round.

"Come in," she said stiffly. "I must know who it is that has spoken about Williams."

"Crishowell folk, mum."

"How many people?"

"A sight o' them."

Nannie's evasions began to rouse her suspicions. "I suppose Bumpett told you," she said, turning suddenly on her servant.

Nannie's jaw dropped.

"Answer me!" cried Mrs. Walters, with rising voice; "was it Bumpett?"

"Well, now I think on it, 'e *was* one o' them."

"I thought so," said Anne, smiling grimly.

"And who is this—this loose woman you were speaking of? You haven't told me that."

"Lawk! mum, I wouldn't so much as name her afore ye," replied Nannie, drawing down her mouth.

"Let me have no more nonsense," exclaimed Mrs. Walters,



with justifiable warmth ; "if you did not mean to speak out, you had no business to say anything at all. I am waiting to hear."

Nannie shuffled from one foot to the other.

"Well, 'tis Mary Vaughan, the toll-keeper's wench."

Anne stood staring at her. "I do not believe it," she exclaimed, turning her back. "If it were true, it would be a direct disrespect to me."

From her point of view this was a charge hardly to be faced.

"It's Gospel, for all that," said the old woman.

Mrs. Walters' eyes rested searchingly on her companion ; the look was returned, and held all the difference between the two women's characters.

"I shall ask him myself," she said ; "I shall soon find out if it is true."

Having sent off her shaft, Nannie held her peace, and followed her mistress indoors, a little nervous, but auguring well from the cloud on Anne's brow ; a cloud accumulating, pregnant with storm.



## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE WAY TO PARADISE

MARY sat behind her counter sewing, for customers were not frequent, and she had plenty of time on her hands. June was well advanced, and the fact was proclaimed by a long spray of dog-roses which stood in a glass beside her. The bloom of the month had not passed her by, and her whole being was making good its losses with the elasticity of youth. Not that she did not carry in her face the same traces of sorrow she also bore in her heart ; but as beauty, mental or physical, cannot be made perfect without suffering, it was a fairer woman sat under the light of the window among the fruits of gracious earth than the one who had parted from Rhys Walters at the Dipping-Pool for the last time, six months before. Time is a great healer, but his rival, Work, runs him hard, and though the former's chance had yet to come with Mary, the latter had begun his ministration.

Now and then she would break into a snatch of song, and although it would end, for the most part, in a sigh and a long silence, it indicated a state of things impossible a little while ago. She lived very much alone, and but for the old woman who owned the shop and the occasional looker-in, who came to make purchases, she spoke to no one. Only when George Williams contrived to get into the town, and presented himself with a certain determined shyness at the door, did she have any touch with the human beings who surrounded her.

And once, when, in the quiet of the evening, she had been induced to stroll out with him, they had crossed the Wye and



wandered a mile or two between the dimness of the hedges, a faint yellow sky overhead and the white crescent of a young moon rising above the limitless translucence of the ether. She had not known at the time how much she was enjoying herself.

She thought of it again as her needle stitched on and on and the feet of the passers-by rang on the pavement. The shop was so low that, when a cart drove along in the middle of the road, there was nothing but a vision of wheels. One was just stopping outside, and, as a pair of singularly crooked legs was to be seen climbing down, she laid her work by, and rose as the door opened to admit a person whom she had often seen, oftener heard of, and never spoken to.

The Pig-driver entered the shop with the air of a man who brings good tidings, so cheerful was his demeanour, so satisfactory his smile, so full of a precise and proven benevolence. A chair stood by the counter, and he drew it yet closer and sat down with a studied care, which suggested that he meant to make immense purchases at illimitable leisure. Before speaking, he eyed her carefully from top to toe.

"What can I serve you with?" inquired Mary civilly.

"He! he!" chuckled Bumpett, "I bean't come to buy; no, no, not to buy."

He laid his stick along the counter, and spreading his elbows out over it, leered up into her face.

"I be come to see you, you an' no one else. Ah! I'm an old stump, I am, but I do like the sight of a pretty face."

She looked annoyed.

"No offence, my dear, no offence."

"What is your business?" she asked, drawing a little back from the counter.

"It isn't business, my dear, it's pleasure this time. I've come because it does me a sight of good to get a look at you, he! he! Name o' goodness! A wonderful thing it is to think what a deal o' mischief a smart-like wench can do. Ye've



done for that fellow up at Masterhouse, an' no mistake. It's all up wi' him now."

She stared at him and laid hold of the wooden counter with her hand.

"Ye needn't look," said Bumpett, "'tis true. I had it from Mrs. Davis, straight. There won't be no more o' he up at the farm, I'll warrant."

"But what has it to do with me?" exclaimed Mary, unable to connect the Pig-driver's meanings, but scenting trouble vaguely. "I don't know what you're driving at, Mr. Bumpett."

"Ye don't know nothin' about it, eh? My! you're a bold one, you are, for all ye look as meek as skim-milk. I suppose you'll tell me ye don't know George Williams next. That'll be no use though, because I see'd ye wi' him at Llangarth Fair hangin' on to his arm like a ladyship. But ye've done him no good wi' your sheep's eyes."

"I don't believe you—I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ah, don't ye? Well then, I'll tell ye."

He smacked his lips, for the moment he longed for had arrived.

"You sit down, girl. 'Tis a long tale. Ye won't, won't ye? Ah! I hope ye've got a good pair o' legs under ye then, for ye'll have to stand some time. He's an ungrateful dog is Williams, behaving shameful to me, that was like a father to 'im; me that put the bread into 'is mouth when 'e was starving. Then 'e got took on at Masterhouse; nothin' was too good for 'im then, I believe. I warned 'er—went out o' my way by a mile an' more, I did. Ye needn't look at me like that, ye mawk-mouthed piece o' spite; ye've done my job for me, and I'm come to thank ye. Now, mind ye this. When Mrs. Walters got wind that 'e was keepin' company wi' a slut like you, there wern't no more ado, I can tell ye. She says, 'Damn ye!' she says, 'ye'll clear yerself out o' this or ye'll be done wi' that trollop down i' the town.' That's a sweet bit o' news to ye, I'll be bound."



"And is he gone?" asked Mary, her face white.

"Gone! I suppose he is, indeed. She had 'im out that blessed evenin'. She's one o' the holy sort, an' trust them to stand no jolly doin's."

Tears started to Mary's eyes. She could not but believe the old man's words, and it was terrible to think that she, of all people, had been the cause of fresh misfortune to George. She had known him first—a poor man, so poor that he had a hard struggle to live, and then she had seen the difference in him when luck had come his way. He had told her many of his troubles, and, when she had allowed interest to creep in, sympathy and friendship had followed.

The day seemed to have grown darker, the light to have faded. She felt herself a blight, a malignant influence which had come into this man's hard life and made it harder. She would have given anything to hide her distress from Bumpett, but she could not, and he sat gloating in his chair over the effect he had made.

"You're a bad man," she said, when she had managed to control herself a little, "I've heard it said of you, and God knows it's true."

The Pig-driver's reply was cut short by the opening of the shop door and the entrance of a customer. She dried her eyes quickly, and he, finding that he could no longer monopolize his victim, departed, and went away a satisfied and contented man, feeling well towards this life. A little boy begged of him in the street and he gave him a halfpenny.

The old woman for whom Mary worked did not generally descend from her room overhead till late in the afternoon. The girl had charge of everything during the greater part of the day, but, at five o'clock, her mistress would come down and take her place behind the counter, leaving her free to do as she pleased and go where she would. She was never asked to give any account of her doings, and was only expected to be back at nine o'clock to put away things in the shop and to close up the house. Sometimes she would stay on in her



place, taking out her book, for she still tried to teach herself, and sometimes, since summer had begun, go out into the scented evening, communing with her own soul and drawing peace from the peace around.

To-night, though she had little heart to leave the house with, she found her mind unable to fix itself on the letters of the simple pages she was spelling out. It flew off continually to George—George unemployed, George despondent, George disgraced because he had not consented to forego the infinitesimal part she had been willing to give him in her life.

It was striking six by the town clock as she went out. The street was a quiet one and there were few people in it, but as her hand left the latch she saw Williams coming towards her. She went hurriedly on to meet him.

"Come," she exclaimed, without other greeting, "I want to see you."

She put her hand on his sleeve and almost turned him round. George turned with her and they went forward, hardly thinking where they were going, he because he was with her and would have gone with her to perdition, and she because she had no other thought than the one which had been in her all day.

"Oh, George, why have you left your place?" she cried.

"How do you know I've left it?" said he, almost roughly.

"I heard to-day. Mr. Bumpett the Pig-driver was here. 'Twas him I got it from."

"What was he doing?"

"He was in the shop."

"Buying?"

"No. He came to tell me you was leaving Masterhouse. He told me why, too."

An exclamation broke from the man.

"Oh, I know. I know all about it," said the girl, her voice trembling. "Do go back now, George, do. For all the good you've done me, I've given you nought but harm. Let me be an' go back to the farm, and I'll never see you nor speak to



you, if they'll take you back. It will make me happy, oh! so happy, George. Do you hear what I say?"

"I hear."

"To-morrow, George. Go to-morrow. She may fill up your place if you wait. Will you go early?"

"I bean't going. I'm off to Hereford to-morrow; I've come down to say good-bye to 'e, Mary."

"Oh! George Williams, will nothing turn you?" she entreated.

"Nothin'," said the young man.

Looking at him she saw it was useless to try to move him. His face was hard, as she had first known it. There was a barred cell in Williams' heart, and when he had entered into it, no one could draw him out, not even the woman he loved.

"If you be going to Hereford, you'll be gone from me, the same as if you was at Great Masterhouse. It will be all one," said Mary presently.

Not knowing how to explain himself, he did not reply. If he stayed on in his place it would mean a denial of the faith that was in him, a disloyalty to her. He did not so much as consider it, and it annoyed him that she should do so.

They had turned into a deep lane leading up to the higher ground. From a clump of thorn-trees further on the cuckoo was calling. When the lane ended, the two stopped and looked at Llangarth beneath their feet.

Mary's heart was full; the world was too complicated for her, man too hard, and George was going. She had ruined him, not willingly, but none the less effectually. She glanced up at him and saw his look fixed on her. His eyes were soft in his hard face, and in them lay the weary knowledge of how far outside Paradise he stood. She made a step towards him, catching her breath.

"George!" she cried, "oh, but I've been bad to you!"

\* \* \* \* \*

It was some time after that they came down the lane again



together, her hand, like a little child's, lying in his. The late sunset had faded, and its remains were just dying along the edge of the world. They said little, the man of few words and the woman of wounded heart. It was the silence of knowledge, profound, irrevocable, lying miles and miles from the door of their lips ; of trust, of sorrow, of coming joy. For her the joy was but faintly showing itself through the veil, for him it stood in the path.

If his Eve had caused him to be expelled from Paradise by one door, she had let him in again at another.



## CHAPTER XXXII

### A DARK LANTERN

ALTHOUGH Isoline had now nothing left to fear from the importunities of her lover and was beginning to see a good broad streak of daylight through the entanglements which beset her path, the reply that her uncle's letter brought from Mrs. Johnson in Hereford was a decided relief. She was to come as soon as she liked and to be prepared for a long stay. The widow had an only daughter, just returned for good from the respectable shelter of a Bath seminary, and she looked upon Isoline's proposal as a piece of real good fortune. She was averse to effort of most kinds, and had been a little fluttered at the prospect of her dove's return and the exertions into which it might lead her. A companion who would amuse and occupy the young lady was so good an extinguisher to the flame of her dilemma that she threw a perfect flood of cordiality into her answer, and begged the coming guest to consider herself bound for six weeks at the very least. She thought Isoline a most desirable intimate for her Emily, having been struck by the decorous elegance of her manners and the tone of delicate orthodoxy which surrounded her.

Miss Ridgeway turned her back upon Crishowell with many feelings of pleasure. There was not one thing in all the place which she really regretted leaving, and even Rhys Walters, who cost her what more nearly approached a regret than anything else, went comfortably out of her head ; on her return, happily a good way off, he might again serve to lend a little zest to an otherwise depressing life. That was his use in her mind.



In Hereford her time and attention were soon taken up by more important things, musical evenings, shoppings, and various little social assemblies at which she became the centre of much admiration to the young gentlemen of Hereford society. Indeed, one admirer, a pale youth connected with a local bank, sent her a copy of verses, beginning—

“Stoop, cruel fair, my gaping wounds to heal,  
Thou goddess graceful, beauteous and genteel,”

in which he described his feelings in a very lamentable manner. This effusion found a resting-place in her album and aroused some envy in the heart of Miss Emily, to whom the author was an object of interest. But, in spite of such small episodes, the two girls got on very well together, and Mrs. Johnson was happy in the arrangement she had made and the enjoyment of a placid and well-nourished leisure.

July went by, August, September, and still Isoline stayed on. The year rolled up to its zenith and declined in a glory of ripened apples and glowing leaves. As October followed, the naked fields about Hereford began to suggest to sporting men the coming hunting season, and the bare boughs of November stirred Harry's heart with the same idea as he saw them in the London parks.

He had succeeded in finding a secretaryship, unimportant in itself, but filling him with the hope of greater things, and he had worked hard. As the smell of the moist earth pervaded the late autumn mornings, he could not help, as he crossed St. James' Park on his way to his business, longing for much which he had lost. Doing without pleasures which have, so far, been necessities has a certain interest of novelty for a time, but it is an interest which soon palls. It had palled on him. His courage remained and his love for Isoline, but that was all.

With the other man whose destiny had tangled itself round her feet the time had gone even more heavily. Sick at heart with her long absence and the desolate feeling that she had



gone beyond his reach, Rhys had dragged himself through the months ; having nothing to look forward to from day to day, he had been ready at times to rush out into the full sunshine and give himself up. But, just as he had lost all hope, a letter had come from Isoline, directed to him under the name by which she knew him, and sent to the Pig-driver, in compliance with an earnest request he had made before they parted. That had buoyed him up for some time, and he drew courage from the thought of her return, which she wrote of as not being far distant.

But when November passed and there came no sign, the blackness closed down again on him. The cold was terrible too, and the nights were bitter. He would come in half-frozen at dawn and bury himself among the sheepskins to endure the weary hours as best he could between sleep and misery.

He cared nothing now for life, and there were times when he made plans of escape ; risk would be welcome, a thousand times welcome, for his whole existence was little but a living death. To be out once more in the light, at no matter what cost, to feel the glory of freedom, of taking his life in his hand, the idea made his blood tingle. Had there been proof of his devotion wanted, no greater could have been given than he gave ; for, above all his pinings, all his dreams of release, the image of Isoline rose and he thrust them down.

Even Bumpett was now anxious to get him out of the country and would have facilitated his escape in any way ; as a servant he was becoming useless, for he spent the nights in rambling about with no thoughts of doing anything but cooling his aching heart with the space and the darkness and getting relief after the imprisonment of daylight. The two had had high words, for the old man, resenting the notion of supporting a dependent who did nothing in return, had threatened to cut off his supplies and to starve him out if he did not leave the cottage of his own accord. But Walters had promised him that his own expulsion would mean immediate exposure, and the Pig-driver had gnashed his teeth over the obvious truth that



the man who does not value his life has an advantage over the man who does.

Rhys would talk to himself as he sat, his head in his hands, in the cellar among the remnants of George's belongings; the dusk in which he dwelt had given his eyes a strange, dull look, and his shoulders stooped from long hours of sitting idle. Bumpett had, at one time, smuggled a book and a few papers in his cart and left them with him; but he had no heart to read, and would only sit and brood, unable to concentrate his thoughts. The whole man had slackened, mind and body; all that was still strong within him was the resolution not to give way until he had seen one face again. It was his fixed idea.

It was decided that Isoline was to go back to Crishowell for Christmas, and she was spending the last few days of her stay in Hereford regretfully. She had been very happy and she did not look forward to a return to the country, especially as she would miss all kinds of seasonable gaiety by so doing.

The two girls were talking as they sat in the lamplight one evening. Dinner was over and Miss Emily was at work upon her embroidery, a chaste piece of design in which a parrot with bead eyes perched stolidly upon a bouquet of yellow roses. Mrs. Johnson, who had a cold, lay upon the sofa, her head enveloped in a woollen shawl; the local newspaper was in her hand, and from it she occasionally read extracts, not so much for the sake of informing her companions as because she liked to make her comments aloud.

"It is really a pity that you will miss the quadrille party next week," said Emily, looking up from her parrot; "what poor Mr. Pottinger will do I cannot think. I am sure he will be vastly annoyed. He will write no more poetry when you are gone."

"Yes, and I did so want to wear my green-and-white muslin too."

"Green and white, forsaken quite," quoted Emily. "Only it will be Mr. Pottinger who is forsaken, not you."

"La! Emily, do not be so absurd. There are plenty of



other young ladies coming for Christmas who can console him."

"Ah, but there is no one like you, Isoline," said the admiring Emily. She was plain herself.

"What nonsense," rejoined her companion, well satisfied.

"Emily, my love," broke in Mrs. Johnson, "it is really impossible to see so far from the light. Pray come and take the paper and read aloud a little, as you are near the lamp."

Emily put her embroidery away with a sigh. She preferred infinitely to gossip with Isoline.

"What shall I read, ma'am?" she inquired, as she sat down again with the journal in her hand.

"Anything, child," said her mother.

"'There is a strong apprehension,'" she began, "'of great distress being prevalent during the coming winter; it is to be feared——'"

"No, not that," interrupted Mrs. Johnson, drawing her woollen shawl more closely round her, "read something else."

"'The Probability of a European War,'" continued her daughter, reading the headings.

"No, no," said the lady, who was disinclined to grapple with large subjects, "read the local news. On the second page, my dear."

Miss Emily ran her eye over the columns. "'Banquet given to the Mayor. A successful entertainment was held in honour of our respected Mayor, Mr. William Smeebody, at the Crown and Gander, on Saturday the 4th instant. The table positively groaned under the triumphs of culinary skill which it displayed, and many brilliant and felicitous speeches followed the repast. But it should not be supposed that the pleasures of the table and the pleasures of the intellect were the only advantages offered to the company. Many of the fair sex were present, including his Worship's lady, whose elegant accomplishments have made her so bright a star in our social firmament.'"

Mrs. Johnson breathed as hard as her cold would permit.



"Really!" she exclaimed, "there is no end to the odious publicity which is being brought into domestic life! I am sure if the newspapers had ventured to speak of *me* in such terms, Mr. Johnson would have disliked it intensely—elegant accomplishments, indeed!"

"'Death of the Reverend Mr. Slaughter,'" continued Emily. "'It is with profound grief that we have to record the tragic incident which took place yesterday. The Reverend Mr. Slaughter was seized with a fit while officiating last evening in Hebron Chapel and expired in the arms of the verger.'"

"Dear! dear!" said the voice from the sofa, "and I was thinking of attending divine worship there too! I had my bonnet half on, you remember, Emily, and I said, 'I shall go to Hebron Chapel,' and then cook came up to speak to me in the middle, so I was too late and had to go later to St. James' instead. How one misses one's opportunities in this world! Dear! dear! dear!"

"Here is something to interest *you*, Isoline," said Miss Emily, "for I remember you said that your friend, Mr. Fenton, was concerned about it."

"'Some little stir has been occasioned at Llangarth and in the neighbourhood by a statement made by a labouring man. It will not be forgotten that one of the worst of the Rebecca riots took place last January upon the Brecon road near Crishowell, and that the now notorious Rhys Walters took the life of the toll-keeper in the struggle. His subsequent disappearance upon the Black Mountain was, at the time of the disturbance, a nine-days wonder, and no trace of him has been found since that date, now almost a year ago. The labourer in question states that he was returning one night last week to a farm called the Red Field, where he is employed, about half-past twelve. He had been at Abergavenny, on the other side of the Pass, and business had kept him there until a late hour. He carried with him a dark lantern which he had been lent in the town. Being footsore, he sat down to rest upon a piece of rock just under the shoulder of the Twmpa. He had put



down the slide of his lantern some time before, for, the path over the turf being good, he felt more able to guide his general direction by the mass of the hill against the sky than by its light, especially as there was a faint starlight. He had sat about ten minutes when he heard a footstep approaching. He called out, but received no answer, and the footstep immediately ceased. He then drew up the slide and saw, not ten yards from him, a figure which he believes to be that of Rhys Walters. The man was looking straight at him, and the labourer, upon whom he produced the effect of an apparition, was so much startled that he dropped the light. It is needless to say that, when he recovered it, the fugitive (if indeed it were he) had disappeared. Questioned closely by the magistrate about his general appearance, he described the person he had seen as a tall man with a long, pale face and piercing eyes. He noticed that he had rather high, square shoulders and eyebrows which came down very low towards the nose. He seemed about thirty years of age. If the labourer speaks accurately, it seems very much as if he were right in his surmises, for the above is a remarkably good description of Rhys Walters. It is even possible that he has been in hiding somewhere in the neighbourhood of the mountain for the last eleven months, though it seems an inconceivable feat for a man to have performed. If this be actually the case, one thing is certain, namely, that he has been assisted in his concealment by some person or persons unknown.'"

"What dreadful things there are in the paper to-night, Emily," observed Mrs. Johnson. "It is quite alarming to think of such a man being at large—so near, too. Look at Miss Ridgeway. One might think she had seen a ghost!"

Isoline sat like an image, staring before her. Emily's reading was weaving a distinct picture, a picture which grew more familiar at every word. She felt as though the world were giving way beneath her and she herself being whirled along into a chaos where order was dead and criminals were allowed to go free about the earth to delude respectable young



ladies, without the very stones crying out against it. What had Providence been doing? The truth was there in its baldness. She had been associating—she, Isoline—with a murderer; she might even have been killed herself. The tears rushed hot into her eyes. These were the sort of things that might happen to other people—rough people—but not to her, surely not to her! She sat stunned, her eyes fixed and brimming. The most shocking part of the whole thing was the coarseness of its reality.

"Oh, what is the matter, Isoline?" cried Miss Emily in tactless dismay. "Mama, she is crying!"

Mrs. Johnson rose from her sofa. She was a kind soul.

"My dear Miss Ridgeway, you are too sensitive," she said, "though I do not wonder you are horrified at such a tale,—so near your home, too. Really, what the law and the police are coming to, I do not know!"

Like many ladies, Mrs. Johnson spent much time in lamenting the inefficiency of these bodies. "Go up to bed, my dear, and I will send you a posset. I am taking one myself for my cold. I fear you are terribly upset, but Emily can sleep with you if you are nervous."

"No, no, thank you," said Isoline, making a great effort at self-control. "I am quite well now. I am not afraid, thank you, ma'am, but I was upset at thinking—at thinking——"

"My dear, I can well sympathize," said Mrs. Johnson, "it is enough to upset any one. Go up to bed. You will get to sleep and forget it."

For one thing Isoline was devoutly thankful, and that was that Emily had apparently not guessed her secret. Soon after her arrival, she had told her the story of her mysterious admirer, and Emily, though professing herself rather shocked, had been immensely interested; it was part of her creed that Isoline could do no wrong. She was romantic too, and she had more imagination than her friend, and the idea of it appealed to her. Should she happen upon the truth, the other girl felt as if she could never face her again, and she was now really glad to be



going back to her uncle immediately, away from the strain of living in perpetual fear of discovery. She had described Rhys so often that Emily's want of perception appeared wonderful. But light might break in on her any day, and, if it did, her own prayer was that she might be absent. The two parted a couple of days later with secret relief on her side, and on Emily's genuine tears.

She left the coach as she had done before, at the foot of Crishowell Lane, and, this time, found Mr. Lewis waiting to meet her and drive her to the Vicarage. As she entered the door, Howlie put a letter into her hand, which had come, he said, just after her uncle's departure, and she took it up-stairs to read.

It was from Harry Fenton, and announced the news that a cousin, long lost sight of, and supposed by the family to be dead, had at last justified their belief by expiring in a distant colony, and, in so doing, had left him a sum representing two thousand a year.



## CHAPTER XXXIII

### A BIRD IN THE HAND

HARRY's employment was not so congenial as to keep him one day at work after the news of his legacy had reached him, and, as soon as it was possible, he started for home.

He was now his own master, and Isoline, that star for which he had sighed through so many weary months, was within his reach; it was a glorious thought. He could hardly resist throwing his hat into the air as he drove along the road between Hereford and Waterchurch again, and saw all the familiar objects he had passed with her when they had travelled along it together in the early days of their acquaintance.

There would be no need for shilly-shallying now, no waiting on luck, on circumstances, on the tardy decisions of other people, for the trumps were in his hand and he had only to declare them and lead the game as he liked. Two thousand a year was a fortune to make him perfectly independent of anything his father might say or do, for were he to cut him out of the place itself, his future would still be assured, and he did not suppose that the Squire would take such a desperate line as that. Where would be the sense of leaving the poverty-stricken estate away from the only one of his sons who had the money to change its fortunes?

His departure for London had not upset Mr. Fenton very greatly, but the news that he had found work and was actually doing it came as a surprise. He had sat him down complacently in the belief that his prodigal son would soon return, wiser and sadder, to throw himself into the arms of a forgiving



parent—for he meant to be forgiving. He was very fond of his children, and, though he stormed about the folly and ingratitude of this one's behaviour, he looked forward to the day when he should receive him back, and, having magnanimously dismissed the subject of his infatuation in a few sentences, should welcome him again to reason and acquiescence in the saner judgment of older and more sober heads. It never struck him that there could be any other ending to the episode.

But as time passed and the letters which came to Lady Harriet gave no sign of change, he began to fear that the drudgery which he had promised himself would soon quench the young man's thirst for work was doing no such thing. He could not understand it, for he had never supposed that Harry, careless, scatter-brained Harry, with his youth and light heart, had got it in him to show so much steadiness of purpose.

To his wife the truth was plain. Harry was growing up. It had taken him some time to begin the process, but the late development had set in at last, and been helped forward, as it so often is, by the influence of a woman. There was nothing to be done, she felt; time might bring things right, and she tried to persuade her husband that expressed opposition could do no good and might do a great deal of harm.

"It is all very well for you to talk," the Squire said; "I am not contemplating a visit of remonstrance to him, though, to hear you, one would imagine I was going to rush up to London and take him by the throat. I shall do nothing about it; I shall simply ignore the whole thing."

Tact was not Harry's strong point. He had made up his mind that there should be no delay, and that a day should not elapse ere he delivered his ultimatum. Acting upon this resolve, he precipitated himself upon his father before he had been twenty-four hours in the house.

The result was direful. The Squire's policy of mingled indifference and magnanimity which he had been hugging against his son's return changed to gall and wormwood when



confronted by the calm request that was made. The young man had not quite robbed his manner of the reflection of what lay behind it, and the knowledge that he was master of the situation peeped out under the formality he had spread smoothly on the top. He did not mean to be discourteous, but the last few months had made him feel twice the man he used to be, and he could not entirely suppress the consciousness.

"Consent?" roared Mr. Fenton, furious at being brought up against actualities which he laid decently away, "consent? I tell you the whole thing is a cock-and-bull story! Don't come here, sir, wasting my precious time over such stuff!"

Harry's answer had at least the merit of simplicity. He went straight out to the stable, took a horse, and set off to Crishowell. Before he reached the village he met Isoline, who was taking an afternoon walk. She sedulously avoided the direction of the mountain now.

It was cold, and she was muffled up in a fur tippet. Her eyes were sparkling. A rose-coloured scarf that she had wound round her neck fluttered behind her.

"You see, Isoline, now everything has come right," he said as he let her hand go; "it is well that you trusted me, isn't it, darling?"

Her smile, as she looked at him, was answer enough. She was very happy.

They turned into a by-road and he drew the bridle over his arm, walking beside her.

There was a shade of embarrassment in his mind; he knew that his chance of seeing and speaking to her was not likely to occur again, and he had so much to say. There were a thousand things he had settled as he came along, and which he must discuss with her. He had rushed over to Crishowell, not only as a sort of protest against his father's attitude, but because he knew that he would not be allowed to see Isoline were the Vicar to be prepared for his coming. He wanted to tell her more about his legacy too, though, to his unsuspecting heart, money seemed a sordid thing to talk about to her. And there



was something of vital importance, something which he meant to propose. He feared to begin. It was simply providential that he had met her.

"I suppose," he began, "that they would not let you see me if I were to come to the house. I have so much to say. Isoline, I want to ask you something. Could you make a sacrifice, do you think? Dearest, I don't know where to start. I must tell you heaps of things, horrid things, some of them."

She looked up quickly.

"My father is in a dreadful rage. I asked him again to-day, just now, to give in. He will not."

"Yes, but you need not mind him now," broke in the girl.

"No, that's it. That is what made him so furious."

"But you are not thinking of giving me up?" she said suddenly. "Oh, Harry! you never mean that!"

"Give you up? Now, when, at last, I can do as I please? Not likely. Isoline, I believe you are joking."

"I never joke," said she, with much truth.

"What I am going to ask you to do is this," he said gravely, stopping in the road and looking older than she had ever seen him look before; "I want to make these separations impossible. I want you to come away with me, once and for all."

"What? Now!" she cried, bewildered, stepping a pace or two back.

"Not now, but soon. In a few days—a week, perhaps."

She looked at him blankly.

"Oh, I cannot!" she exclaimed, "it would never do."

"But why, dear? It has been done before now."

"What would they say?"

"That would not matter. You would be my own wife and no one could say or do anything."

She made no reply and they walked on; her face was downcast. She clasped her hands more tightly in her muff and shivered.

"It would take a little time," he went on; "I should have to get a special licence and go to London first. But in a week



everything could be ready. We can be married in Hereford and then go straight away. Isoline, will you ? ”

She was silent.

“ Won’t you speak, dearest ? ” said he at last. “ Think ; all our troubles would be over and we need never part any more. ”

“ They will be terribly angry, ” said Isoline, lifting her eyes suddenly.

“ No one matters. At least, no one except my mother, ” he added, with a half-sigh, “ and I know she will forgive me in a little, when she knows you better. You cannot think how good she is, Isoline. ”

Her face hardened.

“ We need not see them, I suppose, ” she said.

“ We can go straight abroad, if you like. ”

“ I should like London best, ” said the girl.

“ We need not come back a moment before we wish to. I am quite independent, you see. I have not got much ready money at this moment, but any one will advance it until I am actually receiving my legacy. Want of money need not trouble us again. ”

“ You have two thousand a year, have you not, Harry ? ”

“ Two thousand, one hundred and eleven pounds. There are some shillings and pence, too, I believe. I went into it all with the lawyer. ”

“ How fortunately it has happened, ” said Isoline fervently, her eyes looking onward to the wintry horizon.

He was thinking the same thing. All at once, out of the silence that fell between them, there swam up before him the solemnity of what he meant to undertake. It was for all his life, probably, and for hers too. A vague foreshadowing of the buffets of the world, of time, of chance, of fate, played across his mind. He turned to her, a wave of tenderness in his heart, and looked down into her perplexed face.

“ If you will do this thing, ” he said, “ I will try always to make up to you for what I have asked. ”

She looked straight in front of her.



"But I have not decided," she said, almost petulantly ; "how can I all at once?"

"This is likely to be my last and only chance of talking to you," he pleaded ; "if we settle anything we must do it to-day. You could not see me if I came ; that is the difficulty."

She shook her head. "Not if your father makes all this fuss."

"And writing would not be safe. So you see we must think it out now. Heaven knows when we may meet again."

"Do you think they will *never* give in, Harry?"

"Never's a long day. But it might take time. It might be a year, it might be much more. It does not matter for me, but your uncle will hold to it as long as my father does. Oh, darling! I hate this miserable waiting. Who knows what may happen in a year?"

"That is all true, Harry. Oh! what *can* I do?" she cried. "It is so difficult! If I only had a little time!"

"Take till to-morrow, Isoline."

"To-morrow? And how can I see you to-morrow?"

"You must send to me."

She laughed shortly.

"What messenger have I? Howlie is always busy. Besides, he might do something dreadful."

"Well, I must think of some other way," said he, "and you must think too, Isoline. Between us, we shall light on something. What if you made me some sign?"

"Wait—I have it!" he cried. "Will you go out to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes."

"Any time?"

"Any time within reason."

"Then go for your walk in the morning before twelve o'clock. Do you know the gate at the foot of the lane? The first one as you turn towards Brecon. I passed it just before I met you."

"I do not remember it."

"Then go and look at it after I have gone," said Harry. "There is a bush beside it—only one—and you will see a



last year's nest in the branches. If you will come away with me, put a stone into it. I will ride by in the afternoon, and, if it is there, I shall know you have said yes."

"But can I reach the nest?"

"If you stand on one of the rails of the gate you can. It is not out of reach, for I wondered, as I passed, how it was that the boys had not pulled it down."

He searched her face earnestly for some clue to what she would do.

"What an odd idea," she said at last.

"But will you do that? It is the only way I can think of, and I must know to-morrow. There is so much to arrange, dear."

"Very well," said Isoline, "if I mean 'yes,' I will put in the stone. But suppose it should rain."

"You must come all the same."

She pouted. Her mind was making itself up, and the surer her decision became, the more she was inclined to play with him.

"What will you do if you find there is no stone there?" she asked.

But he had gone further in life than when they had parted, and his lingering boyhood was slipping from him.

"Do you understand how serious this is?" he said rather sternly. "Don't trifle, Isoline. It is 'yes' or 'no,' and it is for you to decide it."

She wondered, for a moment, whether she really liked him as much as she had supposed.

"I am not angry," he said, holding out his hand and fearing he had been harsh, "but I am so anxious, darling."

She hesitated a moment before taking hers out of her muff.

"It had better be this day week," he said, "if you can be ready."

"This day week? But I have no new dresses, or anything."



"You can get them after," said Harry.

"So I could; when we go to London. We shall go to London, shall we not?"

"I think it would be the best thing to do."

"Perhaps you *will* find the stone in the nest," she said, smiling.

He pressed the fingers he held.

"You must slip away early in the morning. It would not do for us to go on the coach, and I cannot let you go alone, so I will get a carriage and have relays of post-horses. We must be in Hereford before midday, and I shall be waiting for you while it is still dark."

"And where must I meet you?" she inquired; "I hope I shall not have to go far alone."

"I cannot wait very near to Crishowell because the carriage might be seen, and when you are missed, as I suppose you will be in an hour or so, they would suspect where you had gone. The longer start we have of any one who may follow, the better."

"Do you think they will come after us, Harry?"

"They might. But I hope by the time they see us, that it will be too late to take you away. You are not afraid, are you, dear?"

"No, I shall not be then. I need not mind any one when I am Mrs. Fenton."

"We must meet on the other side of the village, for that will be a little bit further on our journey. Be in time, Isoline, because the longer I wait, the more chance there is of being seen. The second milestone out of Llangarth would do; you would not have a mile to walk then."

"Suppose any one should see me."

"If you are there at six o'clock, it will be quite dark; even if any one passed you would not be seen. The earlier we can get off the better."

"But suppose they had a light," said she, thinking of the man who had seen Rhys.



"Who carries a light so near sunrise?" exclaimed Harry.  
"No one."

"It is horrible having to go alone. I do not like it at all," said Isoline.

"I will go as far to meet you as I dare. Don't fail me, dear,—but I know you won't."

"You really talk of it as though it were settled," said she. Though she spoke in this way, she knew in her inmost heart that her mind was made up, but not for the world would she have admitted it to her lover, even when the admission was to save her a tiresome walk on the morrow. She liked to exact the last farthing that she considered due to herself. She did not look happy as she retraced her steps, and, though it might be said that her troubles were righting themselves, she was not so, entirely. She was giving up what had been one of her dearest dreams.

There would be no wedding—at least none in the sense in which it appealed to her—no toilette, no bridesmaids envious of her importance, no favours, no grey horses, none of the flourish and circumstance with which she had pictured herself entering married life. She could not have foreseen herself dispensing with it, but then, neither could she have foreseen the malign chance which had revealed Rhys Walters to the man with the dark lantern. The horror of that discovery was never long out of her mind.

It was clear from what the newspapers had said that he was in communication with some one, and, while she and Harry delayed their marriage, every day brought its fresh possibility that Walters might hear a rumour of her engagement. Little as she knew of the deep places of human souls, she had seen, when they parted, that he was desperate, and a sort of dread had come to her of the power she had let loose; since the revelation of his name and character he had become a nightmare. She repented bitterly of her vanity, or, at least, of the toils into which her vanity had led her.

At night she would wake and imagine him lying in wait



behind some tree to murder her, like the determined and forsaken heroes of romances she had read. Such things had happened before. Once she was married and clear of Cris-howell she would be safe ; but she was to pay for the hours in which she had sunned herself in his admiration with the glory that should have been hers as a bride.

Next morning while Harry, at Waterchurch, was loitering about, chained to the vicinity of the stable-clock, she was walking briskly along the road with a stone in her muff.



## CHAPTER XXXIV

### THE PURSUERS

IT was a quiet week which followed at Waterchurch, and when Harry set off to London on business which he refused to talk about, and which he vaguely referred to as connected with his lawyer, Mr. Fenton bade him good-bye amiably enough. His son had neither contradicted him nor re-opened the subject of his marriage, and the Squire, with whom put off was done with, regained his composure and returned to his own affairs. He told his wife nothing, for he had lost his temper and did not wish her to find it out.

Harry had said he would be absent "two or three days," so when a week had gone and he neither wrote nor returned, his father began to wonder what he was doing. He sought Lady Harriet.

"What's Harry about in London?" he inquired. "He seems in no hurry to come back."

"I thought he would have been home before now. I hope there are no complications about his money," she replied.

Mr. Fenton fidgeted about.

"I wish there were no complications about anything else," said he, stopping in front of her. "I wasn't such a fool as he is at his age."

"What has he been doing?" she asked, a twinge of misgiving flying through her mind.

"What has he been doing? Really, Harriet, you are not brilliant! Here have we been at our wits' end because of that girl of Lewis', and you ask me, what has he been doing? Heavens!"



"But there is nothing new, is there? Nothing we don't know?"

"He came to me about it again."

She raised her eyes quickly to his in a question, and he looked out of the window.

"I told him I wouldn't hear of it."

"And then?"

"He went off. I didn't see him till dinner that night."

"But where did he go?"

"Go? How should I know where he went? I know where he *will* go, and that's to the deuce," said the Squire, beginning to march about the room. "The question isn't where he went, but where he is now. That is the point of it, and I am surprised that you, Harriet, don't see it. I shouldn't wonder if he were sitting there with his arm round the girl's waist at this moment."

"At Crishowell? I know Mr. Lewis would never allow that."

"Allow it? Who'd ask him to allow it, I should like to know? They needn't be under Lewis' nose. He's there, you take my word for it." At every sentence the Squire's voice rose. "I'm not going to stand such a thing any more. It's time somebody did something. What's the use of our sitting here with our hands before us like so many fools, eh?"

"What shall you do? You see, now he is his own master," said Lady Harriet, sighing.

"His own master? I'll show him whether he is his own master or not! You know as well as I do that there is no entail on Waterchurch. I'll just bring that to his notice. 'My good boy,' I'll say, 'you bring this upstart of a girl here and you'll see whether there's an entail or not!' That'll bring him round."

"I'm afraid that's not a very good plan, Edward. That would be worse than useless."

"Pshaw! I tell you I'll soon find out whether it's useless!"



Mr. Fenton sat down to a writing-table and began scribbling excitedly. When he had sealed up his note he rang the bell.

"Is there any one in the stable?" he inquired, rather unnecessarily, seeing that it was just half-past eight in the morning. The Fentons were early people and breakfasted at eight, even in winter. Lady Harriet never sat long at the table after meals were over, and they had just left the dining-room.

Before the man could answer, a steady, approaching trot was plain in the avenue, and, a moment later, there was a grinding of wheels upon the gravel.

"What an extraordinary hour for any one to come," exclaimed Lady Harriet.

As she spoke, the long face of the Vicar of Crishowell's old mare was visible through the window. She was blowing, and though only her head could be seen, it was apparent, from the way it rocked backwards and forwards, that she was cruelly distressed.

The butler went out and returned.

"Mr. Lewis, sir. He says he must see you particular. He wished to be shown into the study, sir."

"Is Harry here?" asked the Vicar, as his friend entered.

"No," said Mr. Fenton. "God bless me, Lewis, you look quite white."

"My niece is missing," exclaimed the Vicar, his lips shaking; "I have come to tell you. They have gone off—Heaven forgive them for what they have done! We must go after them. I came here with a faint hope of finding Harry, but I must be off again."

The Squire took him by the arm as he was making for the door, and pulled him into a chair. He sank into it, covering his eyes.

"What must you think of me, you and Lady Harriet? Fenton, I never foresaw it, blind fool that I was! She was so quiet, I never dreamed that the whole thing was not over, so far as she was concerned; she did not even seem to care."

The Squire was bewildered.



"She complained of headache last night and told the maid not to call her in the morning. The girl forgot and tried to open the door. It was locked, so she got frightened and came for me, and we found the room empty. The bed had not been slept in, though one could see that she had been lying on it; she must have lain down in her clothes for fear of not awaking in time. Her handbag was gone, and her brushes and things—that is what made me suspect. I sent a boy down to a cottage on the road to Llangarth to ask if anything had been seen, and the man had heard a carriage pass a little before six and seen the lights of a postchaise. He heard it pass again on its way back not long after."

"How do you know it was Harry?" asked Mr. Fenton.

"I can only guess; but who else could it be? I must be off at once. I am going to Llangarth, for I shall get some clue at the toll this end of the town. They would be obliged to pass through it."

"I will go too," said the Squire, his hand on the bell. "You can't get on with the same horse, Lewis. We must put in one of mine."

"Quarter to nine," said the Vicar, pulling out his watch. "It was nearly eight when I left. Two hours ago I knew nothing."

As the two sat side by side they did not exchange a word. The horse was a good trotter, and the Squire, who drove, put him to his utmost pace.

The Vicar looked blankly out on the hedges and fields which approached, passed, and dropped behind, bitterness round his closed lips. The few illusions he had ever had about his niece were fallen from him, and he understood her thoroughly. It was sordid money that had made her do this thing, that had decoyed her out into the darkness of the winter morning, and not the man who was waiting for her. If love had undone Isoline as it had undone Mary, he felt he could have recoiled from her less, though the outside world would have deemed it a worse calamity. It would have struck him to the earth indeed, but it could hardly have sickened him as this had



done. He would have given all he possessed to prevent any one belonging to himself from dealing such a blow to those he loved. There was no pretence, no veil, however thin, no excuse. It was money, money, money. She had encouraged Harry when she thought him rich, dropped him angrily, resentfully, as one drops a kitten that has scratched one, when she knew he was poor, and sprung at him again the moment his fortunes mended. And he was the son of the best friends he had. He had left Waterchurch without seeing Lady Harriet, for he had felt unable to face her.

They pulled up at the toll on the near side of Llangarth, where the gatekeeper gave them what information he had. The carriage had gone through Crishowell very early, before it was light, and had repassed on its return journey about a quarter-past six—maybe twenty past, or thereabouts—he could not tell exactly. There was a lady in a black veil. He knew that, because he had turned the lantern on the inside of the carriage, and the gentleman who paid the toll was young—fair, he thought—but he couldn't say; he didn't know them, not he, for he was new to the place, but the gentleman had seemed in a hurry. He could give no further clue. But it was enough.

They drove on to the Bull Inn, which was the only posting-house in the town, and Mr. Fenton sprang out and went in to find the landlord.

"Ain't a pair left in the place," said an ostler, who emerged from the stable. "The 'ole lot's out."

He began mechanically to take the Squire's horse out of the shafts.

The landlord's tale was the same. There was a postchaise, but nothing to put into it; they might get something at the next posting-house in Welchurch, seven miles on.

"What is that over there?" inquired the Vicar, pointing to a brown muzzle which was pushed out of a box at the end of the court.

"That's my old horse, sir, that I drive myself."



"Let me have that in my shafts," said the Squire, "and I'll make it good to you."

In a few minutes they were on their way again with their faces to Hereford, and the landlord's horse, who had good blood in his veins, had put his head into the collar. The reason that they had been unsuccessful in getting what they wanted was simple enough ; every pair was out on the road for Harry.

The long tedium of the miles seemed interminable till they reached Welchurch, and the white faces of the milestones as they went past were the only things either man had the heart to notice. They were rewarded at last by the sight of the inn and by finding on inquiry that there was a light chaise and a pair of horses to be got. They took their seats grimly and set off on the next stage at a gallop.

It was twenty minutes past eleven when they drew up at the Green Dragon in Hereford, and the Squire and the Vicar got out, stiff after thirty miles of sitting cramped in their seats. They did not expect Harry to leave his carriage at so prominent a place as the chief hotel in Hereford, should he mean to stay in the town, but they looked round the courtyard for the possible sign of an arrival. The place was quiet and vacant as they asked hurriedly for news, and, finding none, started for a humbler inn hard by at which they hoped they might come upon some trace of the couple. Sure enough, as they entered its precincts, they saw a carriage, splashed with mud and standing empty ; beside it was a pair of unharnessed horses being groomed by two stable-helpers.

"Where has that carriage come from ?" inquired Mr. Fenton of one.

The lad stopped hissing through his teeth and stood with the brush midway between himself and his horse.

"Can't say, I'm sure. I don't know nothin' about it."

"But how long has it been in, boy ?"

"About half-an-hour or more. That's 'im over there in the stable."

The two men looked round, almost expecting to see Harry,



and met the postillion's red countenance and hilarious glance which beamed at them from a doorway ; evidently he had had refreshment after his exertions, and, from the satisfaction on his face, it seemed unlikely that he had paid for it himself. He came forward rather unsteadily.

"Have you come from Llangarth?" cried Mr. Fenton, pointing over his shoulder at the muddy vehicle.

The man smiled and laid his finger along the side of his nose ; whoever was responsible for his entertainment had not done the thing by halves. Then he stood a moment, his legs wide apart and his thumbs in the armholes of his open jacket, eyeing the gentlemen with vacillating complaisance.

"That 'ud be lettin' the cat out of 'er bagsh," he replied slowly, turning away with what he supposed to be dignity.

Mr. Fenton sprang after him, raising his cane, but the Vicar interposed. "That will do no good ; there is a much better way than that," he said, as he took a couple of half-crowns out of his pocket. "Look here, my man, which church did you drive them to?"

"Don't know the name of it," replied the postillion, with a guileful look. "Unless you're come to m—marry 'em?" he added, suddenly realizing Mr. Lewis' clerical dress.

The Vicar hated a lie of any kind, and hesitated, but his companion had no such scruples.

"We shall be late if you don't tell us," he broke in, "and they will not be married to-day. It's getting on for twelve."

The man stood scratching his head ; his mind was turned upside down in a chaos of beer, and there was nothing to suggest that the two gentlemen who had walked into the yard had been travelling post haste.

At this moment the Vicar slipped the two half-crowns into his hand. The recipient shook his head as he pocketed them.

"That 'ud *never* do," he observed, in an access of tipsy morality. And, beckoning mysteriously, he led the way into the street.



"Thatsh shurch," he said, laying a careful hold upon Mr. Fenton's coat collar, and pointing to a spire which rose, not a hundred yards away, from a railed graveyard.

The two men hurried on, for they had no wish to be heralded down the street by the staggering figure. They arrived at the gate just as Isoline and Harry were emerging from the porch.

The level of the street was below that of the building, and a flight of steps ran up to the door. Bride and bridegroom stood at the top, arm in arm. On Harry's face, caught full by the light, was the trace of strong feeling and an infinite tenderness for the woman at his side; it was humble too, for he felt he had not deserved so much. He turned to her, and, in so doing, perceived his father and the Vicar looking up at them from the pavement below. Isoline saw them too, and launched a glance of triumph at them; the hour she had waited for had come, and her only regret lay in the fact that Lady Harriet was not present also. She carried a little silk bag that hung by ribbons to her arm, and she twirled it light-heartedly as she looked down at the two grey-headed men.

The man and wife descended the narrow steps, Harry drawing back to let her pass on in front. She sailed forward and paused at the bottom within a few paces of her uncle and her father-in-law, hesitating whether to speak to them or not; the former's expression was a study in mortification and pain, of which she took no notice. Catching the Squire's eye, she made a little curtsy that she hoped might express some of the dignity in which she henceforth intended, as Mrs. Fenton, to wrap herself. But there was something in her which made it a failure.

Harry went straight up to his father, feeling that he could confront any one or anything with calmness in the glad knowledge of what had just occurred, but the Squire waved him off. He met Mr. Lewis' face of reproach.

"I will take care of her, be assured, sir," he said. Then, finding that the Vicar made no reply, he turned and followed



his wife, who was walking slowly up the street. The two men went into the church to look at the register.

It was midday when the newly-married pair reached the inn where they had left their postchaise, for the wedding had taken place a little later in the morning than they intended. On driving to the church they had found two other people waiting to be married, and, as the first arrivals, the clergyman had taken them before Harry and Isoline. She had looked at the woman who stood before the altar with some interest, for she was beautiful with a beauty unusual in country girls of her class, and her face showed that she felt every word of the service; the man was a young labourer of the massive type, who wore a purple neckcloth with a bird's-eye spot.

When their own marriage was over and the other one going on, the first couple had gone into the graveyard for a short time and sat down together on a bench; it seemed as if they wished to realize quietly what had happened to them. When they came out they walked past the inn, and the two brides came face to face. Isoline stood by the door while Harry spoke to the landlord, and there was admiration in Mary's eyes as she looked at the pretty lady in the feathered hat and the fur through which her cheek bloomed like a blush rose. The little cloud on Mrs. Fenton's brow had lifted, and as she saw it she half smiled. Had she known the history of the girl she smiled at she would have drawn aside her skirt so that she might not so much as touch her with the hem of her garment.

Mr. Fenton and the Vicar retraced their journey the same afternoon and parted, sadly enough, in Llangarth. The Squire took the chaise and post-horses on to Waterchurch, and the other, whose vehicle had been left at the Bull Inn, agreed to drive his friend's horse back to Crishowell and to give it a night's rest before sending it home next day.

He drove through the streets, tired in every limb and sore at heart. He felt worn out and disgusted with everything, and physically very weary; he had not remembered so vividly that he was seventy odd years old for a long time.



He went so slowly and was so much lost in his own thoughts that the horse had been brought to a standstill almost before he noticed a thin, shabby woman who had run from the door of a house, and was, with unexpected energy, taking hold of the bridle.

"Stop!" she cried, raising her hand.

The Vicar pulled up, leaning out from under the hood, and she came up close and laid hold of the dashboard, as though to prevent him forcibly from continuing his way.

"There's a man dying," said the woman, panting a little, "an' he wants you. You'll have to be quick, sir; he's mortal bad. Up there."

Mr. Lewis looked at the house she pointed at, a tumble-down building which faced the road.

"It's Hosea Evans," she went on; "he's come out o' jail a fortnight."

"The landlord of the Dipping-Pool? It's the Methodist parson he wants, not me."

"Not him. He's been a-calling out for you all the morning. I was just off to Crishowell when I see'd you go by the door. He's pretty nigh done, an' he's crying out for you. There's somethin' on his mind, an' he says he can't tell no one else."

Mr. Lewis turned the horse's head, his own troubles retreating, as they were apt to do, before those of other people. Following his guide, he entered a small, dirty room. It was getting dusk outside, which made the miserable place dark enough to prevent his seeing anything but the one ghastly face in the corner lit up by a candle which stood on a chair by the bed. There was the movement of a dim form in the room, and the doctor who attended the very poor in the town rose from the place where he had been sitting. The woman approached the dying man and whispered close to his ear; a wan ray of relief touched his face, and he moved his hands.

"He is very near his end," said the doctor. "It is typhoid. These jails are not all that they should be, I am afraid. He has been a bad character too, poor wretch."



The Vicar went up to Hosea, and the shabby woman moved the candle away so that he might sit on the chair beside him.

"I can't see," said Evans thickly.

"I am here," said Mr. Lewis, laying his hand on the wrist from which the pulse was fast ebbing; "what can I do for you, my brother? Shall I pray?"

Hosea moved his head feebly.

"No, no; I want to speak a bit, but I can't, I'm that done."

The doctor poured some liquid into a cup and held it to his lips.

"Try to swallow," he said, "it will help you."

The innkeeper made an effort and swallowed a little.

"Come near," he whispered, and the Vicar leaned down.

"I killed Vaughan," he said, "not Rhys Walters."

Mr. Lewis was so much astonished that he did not know what to say, and merely looked into the man's face to see whether or not he was in full possession of his senses.

"Then that is what has been troubling you?" he said at last.

Hosea made a sign of assent. "Me it was," he continued feebly, "me, an' not him. We both struck at him together, an' my stick came down on his head and laid him his length. His no more than shaved his shoulder."

"Are you certain that what you say is true?" asked the Vicar, who was suspecting the dying man of an hallucination, but who began to see sense in the circumstantiality of his words. "If you killed him, why did Walters fly so suddenly without another blow?"

"He was blinded. A stone took him in the face as he let out, an' he never knew 'twarn't himself as did for him. So he went off smart-like——"

The effort to speak plainly was almost too much for Evans. He lay looking at the Vicar with eyes that seemed to be focussed on something very far beyond the room.



"And is that everything you want to tell me?" asked Mr. Lewis, bending down in answer to a faint gesture.

The dying man signed for the cup in the doctor's hand, and, when a few more drops had been poured down his throat, he spoke again.

"There's the money too."

"What money, my man?"

"My money. I've a mortal lot—the box below the bed. It's for her, an' you'll tell her it warn't him, not Rhys Walters. It's to keep her. 'Tis all I can do now."

"But who do you mean, Evans? Try to tell me."

"Mary—Mary Vaughan. She was a good lass, an' 'twas me killed him."

His voice paused, but his lips moved, and the Vicar could just distinguish the word "box."

"Shall I draw it out from under the bed?"

Hosea smiled faintly.

They pulled out a thick, black wooden box about a foot square, and placed it on the mattress beside him; his eyes lit up as he saw it, and his fingers worked. He had been called a "near" man in his time, and the Vicar remembered that, as landlord of the Dipping-Pool, he had always had credit for being well off, in spite of the poor place he inhabited. When the lid was opened there proved to be nothing inside it but a stuff bag. The sight of it seemed to give Evans strength. "All notes," he said, "a hundred pound an' over. Count them."

Mr. Lewis began to do so, Hosea's sunken eyes following every movement of his lips. There was in bank notes one hundred and five pounds, and in coin fifteen shillings and tenpence.

"Now write," said the innkeeper, "quick."

It was not easy to find pen, ink and paper, and the woman was obliged to go out and borrow what was necessary from a more advanced neighbour; but when this had been done, the Vicar wrote out the simple sum of Hosea's wishes. It was



plain enough; everything he owned was to go to Mary Vaughan unreservedly. He was past writing, but he insisted on the pen being given him, and, with the doctor supporting him in his arms, he made a mark where Mr. Lewis had written his name. The two men witnessed it and added their own signatures.

"You are happier now that we have done that, are you not?" said Mr. Lewis. "You can trust me to see Mary Vaughan at once, and I will take care that what you want is carried out. It is right that you should do all you can for her. There is nothing else?"

"No," said Hosea, though his eyes belied his words. "I've been a bad man," he whispered, after a silence. "I suppose you can't do nothin' for me?"

"I can pray," said the other, as he went down on his knees by the bed.

He began the commendatory prayer for the dying, and as his voice ran steadily on, the room grew very still. Only the cries and footsteps in the street outside broke the quiet. The doctor was kneeling too. The window-pane showed like a thing far away in a dream, a little blue square in the close-crowding walls that pressed upon Hosea's dying eyes. The candle guttered and went out, and the Vicar finished his prayer in the dark.

When the last word was said, the doctor approached and struck a light. There was nothing left of the innkeeper but the poor, earthly husk that had clothed his imperfect soul, lying on the bed.



## CHAPTER XXXV

### NEW YEAR'S EVE

THE Pig-driver had been absent from his usual haunts for more than ten days, business having taken him on a stealthy tour of inspection to the connecting-links of his trade ; it was a duty which called to him at the end of each year, and he had returned this time lighter of heart than ever, for his affairs were flourishing, and the books so carefully kept by his nephew told a promising tale.

It was New Year's Eve ; a year and more since Rhys' and Harry's lives had crossed under the shadow of the Black Mountain in that unconscious rivalry which their destinies had forced upon them ; a year since Mary had looked her last upon her lover's face as he rode away from the Dipping-Pool. In the great shuffle which a year will sometimes bring to groups of people whose lives concentrate in the same circle, Bumpett was the unchanged one, as he shambled into Crishowell to hear what local news had cropped up since his departure.

As he went along between the houses a burst of singing, which came like a gust of wind from a cottage a little way in front, caught his attention and made him smile. He smiled because he intended to spend the night in the village and because he knew very well that no conviviality was considered complete without his presence, more especially on an occasion so important as the seeing-out of the Old Year. He moistened his lips with his tongue and hurried forward, a pleasant anticipation on his face ; it was little more than eight o'clock,



and there was a deal in the way of joviality possible before midnight.

He paused outside the house, like the discreet man he was, to see if he could identify any of the voices before committing himself to their society. A new song was beginning, and he recognized it as one called "Mary Morris" which had come from the mining districts, and which was very popular in the neighbourhood. It was sung by a single voice, and set forth the rather irregular loves of the mining character who was its hero. At the last line of each verse the company joined in with an ardour and a breadth of vowel which bid fair to rouse the village.

There was a large stone outside the door, the remains of an old horse-block, and on this the Pig-driver sat down to listen.

The singer made one or two false starts, and finding himself invariably landed in a higher key than he had bargained for, seemed inclined to desist but for the encouragements of his audience, which, at last, launched him safely upon the surging wave of the tune.

"O! Mary Ma-awris!  
 Why was you leave me?  
 You leave me all alone, most fit to break my he-a-art!  
 You have gone and left me,  
 All alone so cruel,  
 Never am I happy since you and I was pa-art!"

"Since yew an' oi was pa-a-art!" roared the chorus.

"O! Mary Ma-awris!  
 I was love your sister,  
 I was love your sister most so well nor you!  
 And my heart was broken  
 Like a crochan chinay;<sup>1</sup>  
 Once that you have broke him, never can put him to!  
 Never can put him to-o-o!"

Here the audience began to stamp to the tune, and the singer raised his voice yet a little higher.

<sup>1</sup> A broken jug.



"O! Mary Ma-awris!  
I'm living at Penpulchwyth;  
When you come to Merthyr, mind you come to me;  
Though I be married  
To another 'ooman,  
Come in straight, O Mary, an' never mind for she!  
Never moind for she-e-e!"

O! Mary Ma-awris!  
We will be so happy,  
We will be so happy, like a king and queen;  
I will mind the farm, and  
You shall mind the babies,  
And we will be so bewtiful as never before was seen!  
As never before was see-e-en!"

Almost as the last long-drawn syllable died away, the door opened and a man came out, who, not noticing Bumpett till he all but fell over him, jumped back with an exclamation. The Pig-driver was taken with a fit of laughter.

"Who be you?" inquired the man, when he had collected his wits.

"'Tis just me, Bumpett o' Abergavenny, listenin' to the music. Didn't expect to find me, did ye? What sort of a feller is that singin'? I can't mind his voice."

"Williams o' Tan-y-bulch. He's a fine talker too; tells ye as many lies an' bad words in an hour as I could in a week."

"And who else?"

"Stevens an' Griffiths an' Prosser an' William Pritchard an' old Job Hondy. There's only a few more because of the drinking up at Price's."

Price was the carpenter, and his house was the usual meeting-place of the Pig-driver's set.

"I'm going up there myself," continued the man. "The jug's getting pretty nigh empty here, an' I don't see my way to giving 'em no more. I'll start fair over there, ye see."

"Then it's you that's payin' for their treat?"

"Yes, yes, 'tis my party. There's just enough left i' the jug to keep them quiet till I've had my turn over at Price's afore they all be after me. I'll be gone then, afore they do come."



"But you don't own this house," said Bumpett, rather mystified; "I've never seen you before."

"An' you don't see me now," rejoined the other, with an airy glance into the darkness, "nor *they* won't see me neither after I've had my drink."

"Well, you *have* a right notion o' things—I can see that, anyhow," said the Pig-driver, beginning to like his acquaintance. "I'll step down wi' you to Price's."

"Best not," said his companion dubiously.

"Oh, but that I will," replied Bumpett, winding his arm confidingly through that of the stranger. The other proceeded rather unwillingly, but the old man would take no denial.

"But that's Pritchard's house," he began again, jerking his thumb towards the place they had come from; "how be you come to pay for the drink in it?"

"I haven't paid yet," replied the other cheerfully.

"Any news flyin' about the town?" inquired Bumpett, after one or two vain attempts at forcing his companion's confidence. "It's goin' ten days since I was hereabouts, and I haven't had a word wi' no one."

"It depends what you call news," said the stranger. "For my part, there's little can flummox me. Have e' heard of the young Squire down Waterchurch way runnin' off to Hereford last week? Took the Parson of Crishowell's niece along wi' him, an' was married safe an' sound like a man. The old Squire was after him, an' Parson Lewis, an' though they battered shameful at the church door—so they say—'twarn't no use. The lock was turned till they was tied tight. Not that that flummoxes me though; why I tell 'e——"

"Well, well, that's all news to me," exclaimed the Pig-driver, with whom admiration was beginning to oust every other sentiment. "I must get down to Price's afore any o' them's gone, an' hear the rights o' that."

"The rights? Bean't I tellin' 'e the rights? What more do ye want nor what I've told ye?"

"No offence," said the Pig-driver hurriedly.



"Ye don't seem to know much about nothin'," continued his friend, unmollified. "Now, for me, there's not a thing done within twenty mile but I know it all pat afore ye can so much as put your thumb to your nose. Why, the breath wasn't out of Evans o' the Dipping-Pool's body, an' I knew where his money was to land. That's me all over."

Bumpett dropped his arm with a jerk.

"Did 'e say Evans? Hosea Evans?"

"I did; an' I'll say it again if ye've any fancy for jumpin' like that. He's as dead as a nail. Died just after he come out of jail, an' left every damn penny o' two hundred pound to the toll-keeper's wench that used to keep company wi' Rhys Walters."

This time the Pig-driver was not to be borne down by any superfluous knowledge on the part of his companion.

"She's lucky," he observed shortly.

"And so's the chap that's married her. His name's Williams, and he used to live in a queer enough place up by the mountain, and do a turn at hedgin' now an' again. Not much hedgin' now, I suppose. Livin' like a lord, more likely."

Bumpett's tongue grew dry, and he grinned mechanically; his lips stretched and went back like pieces of elastic, and his friend, who was waiting for some tribute to his superior information, could hear odd sounds going on inside his mouth.

"Ah, you didn't know that!" he exclaimed, "and I'll wager ye didn't know 'twas him killed Vaughan an' not Rhys Walters. He came out with it all on his death-bed to the Parson o' Crishowell."

"Go on wi' ye!" broke out the Pig-driver.

"That's all very fine," replied the stranger in a tone of offence, "but just you go off to the police at Llangarth and see! Lewis an' the doctor an' a woman was witness to it, an' it's written down in the Law, I tell 'e. Like enough the Queen has it all at her fingers' ends by now."

It was half-an-hour later when Bumpett slipped unnoticed out of Price's door into the darkness. He had left his new



acquaintance in an advanced state of intoxication among the revellers, where his varying moods of confidence and pugnacity were beginning to make him something of a nuisance. But the stranger had spoken truth and the old man had heard the same from the lips of his friends.

It was not only rage at the thought of George's good luck, though, that was boiling in him, which drove him along at such a pace, it was the far more disturbing knowledge of Rhys Walters' innocence. He resolved to go to the cottage without an hour's delay, and by threats or bribes to compel him to leave the country. He would, if all else failed, tell him that his hiding-place was known to the police and press on him any assistance to escape that his money or ingenuity could command.

He had been living in daily dread of his unprofitable servant's indiscretion, and since the experience of the man with the dark lantern had appeared in the local newspaper, he would have given much to know him clear of England. And now, if Walters' own folly should bring him to discovery, and he should learn that he was innocent of Vaughan's death, the consequences might be dreadful. He would have to suffer for his share in the Rebecca riot, but having done so he might one day return to his own, damaged, perhaps, but with the stain of blood-guiltiness off his hands, and live on the very scene of his—Bumpett's—activities, a constant embarrassment and menace. It was not likely that he would denounce malpractices in which he had been involved, for the same drag would act on him as on the Pig-driver's other subordinates, namely, their liability to suffer side by side with their master. Sheep-stealing, though no longer a capital offence, was punished heavily, and sane men do not usually open the prison doors for themselves. But, of late, there had been that about Rhys which forbade him to judge him as he would have judged another man. He felt that it was desperately urgent.

When he was clear of the village and beginning to ascend towards the mountain he found it no easy matter to get



forward ; there was not a star in the sky, and a damp mist, which, though he knew it not, was enwrapping the higher country towards which he pressed, became thicker at every step. The lane leading to the old cart track was scarcely less deserted than itself, and his feet struck against heaps of loose stones which the autumn rains had rolled here and there into shelving heaps. He put his hand up to his face and cursed to meet the wet on it. It was one of those nights so frequent in winter, a repetition of the one through which Rhys had once felt his way to the Dipping-Pool.

By the time he reached the cottage the enveloping fog was so thick that he would not venture to trust himself upon the plank crossing the water, but waded through, though the cold touch on his ankles made him gasp. He groped round the end of the house till he found himself among the gooseberry bushes of the garden. It was impossible to see anything, and he could only guess at their position as he stumbled along, pricking himself against the stems. When he came to one growing by the wall he pushed it aside, guided by a faint light which came out of the hole in the masonry behind it. From the little shine he gathered that Rhys had not gone out and was in the cellar below. He put his mouth to the aperture and called down it.

After two or three vain attempts to make himself heard, the Pig-driver could distinguish steps moving in the cellar.

"'Tis me—Bumpett !" he cried. "Go you round to the door and let me in."

As he stood waiting for Walters to turn the key, he told himself that he would not depart again without the young man's consent to leave ; but he wondered how he should manage the matter, for there seemed to be nothing in the world by which he could keep a hold over him. It must be done somehow, that was all he knew.

It was quite dark in the upper part of the house as he entered and followed Walters down the ladder. There was a



light standing on a piece of furniture, and Bumpett sat down by it on a broken chair and looked up at his companion. He had seen him continually at short intervals during the last six months, and the alteration in him had not hitherto struck him as it would have struck a stranger. But, all at once, in the wretched light, as the two confronted each other, the Pig-driver saw through the veil of custom which had blinded him to the ghastliness of the change in Rhys. A feeling akin to horror took him by the throat as he sat and looked into the haggard face with the black shadows thrown upwards by the candle lying upon it. Not that it was pity or concern that moved him—he cared little enough for anything that affected the man before him—but even he, coarse, sordid, callous as he was, could feel that Rhys Walters had gone beyond the reach of fear or hope, joy or malice, and that the grey waters of despair divided him from the power of aught else but some one influence which was working within him. Nothing could help or harm him any more. The soul that looked out of his sunken eyes was one pertaining no longer to the ordinary world of human beings with its hates and loves, its ambitions and griefs; it was something which had gone far off into a dominion of one idea.

“What do you want?” asked Walters, laying his hand on the improvised table and bringing his face into the circle of light.

The shades cast round his jaw and cheek-bones made them stand out with even greater prominence, and the hair, hanging unkempt on either side of his brow, framed it in with dull black. He seemed to Bumpett gigantically tall.

“Look you,” began the Pig-driver, folding his hands over his stick, “there’s no more use in dangleing on here, an’ ye must just pearten up, Walters. It’s time ye was out o’ this. I’ve got a cousin down Cardiff way, and if I could get ye off to him, he’d give ye a hand wi’ some o’ they ship captains. Ye’d be out o’ harm’s reach then, an’ a good job too.”



For answer Rhys looked at him with a smile, not as though he were smiling at him, but at something which he saw in his mind.

"No," he said, shaking his head ; "no, no."

"Nonsense," rejoined Bumpett smartly. "I'm not trifling now, and out o' this ye'll have to go, my lad."

"Not I," said Rhys, his eyes hardening.

"I tell 'e, go ye shall !" cried the old man. "'Tis my place, not yours, an' not another bite nor sup can ye get when I stop sendin' the food that keeps ye. I can turn ye out, an' I will too."

"You daren't do that," said the other, looking sideways at him ; "there's no manner of use trying to frighten me. Put me out of this house, and it's you that'll have to be on your way to Cardiff, not me. And you'll be too late."

"I'm speakin' for yer good," began the Pig-driver again, seeing that threats could produce no effect. "Mind me, ye don't hear nothing hid away in this black hole, but it's different wi' me. I get all the talk o' the country-side, an' I know the police has got their noses turned this way ever since ye let the fellar wi' the dark lantern get sight o' ye on the mountain. It was all written i' the newspapers, so I did hear. Old Job Hondy in Crishowell was tellin' me, for he got a loan of the paper from Parson Lewis."

A ray of interest lit up Rhys' face.

"And I'll tell Hondy to ask for a sight of it again," continued Bumpett, seeing that he had caught the other's attention, "an' bring it up to show ye ; leastways, if it's not lost wi' all the moyther he's had i' the house wi' that young miss o' his."

"What do you say ?" exclaimed Walters, coming closer to Bumpett.

"I said I'd get the newspaper an' show ye what ye've done wi' yer tomfooleries."

"What did you say about Mr. Lewis ?" cried Rhys, taking hold of the Pig-driver.



"I said he was likely moythered wi' that young niece of his and her doin's."

"But she is in Hereford," broke out the young man.

"In Hereford? Not she. She's off to London wi' young Squire Fenton. Run out one mornin' when the old boy was between the blankets an' up to Hereford an' got married to him. He's been left a fine fortune. She didn't forget that, I'll be bound, no, no indeed."

Bumpett had hardly time to end his sentence before Rhys sprang at him like a wild cat and gripped him by the collar.

"Liar!" he shouted, "liar! liar!"

At every word he shook the old man as though he would jerk the life out of him.

The Pig-driver, though naturally cautious, was not altogether a coward, and rage and bewilderment are sharp spurs. He struck out as fiercely as he could; words were impossible, for he had not the breath with which to utter them. When Walters threw him back into the chair from which he had dragged him, he was livid and lay against the back of it with hardly strength left in him to speak.

"That's not true!" shouted Rhys, standing over him. "It's a lie! Speak up, or I'll twist your neck like a jackdaw's!"

His face was twitching all over and his hands clasped and unclasped themselves.

The Pig-driver opened his mouth.

"The truth!" cried Rhys, "do you hear? The truth, or out of this you don't go a living man!"

"I've told ye the truth," snarled Bumpett. "'Twas no more nor last week, an' every one knows it now."

"It can't be, it can't be."

"But I tell ye it is," cried Bumpett, turning the knife in the wound. "She's a tiert lass, she is, not one o' the sort that gives a bean for a pea."

There was the silence of a moment, and there broke from Rhys a cry so bitter, so despairing, that it seemed as though the heart from whose depths it came had broken. Then he



sank down by the table, and, laying his head on his arms, sobbed like a little child, with his face hidden on the sleeve of his shabby coat.

It was not until the Pig-driver had been long gone that he raised himself. The light had sputtered out beside him, and he got up and groped his way to the ladder. He climbed to the room above, crossed the threshold into the night, and set his face to the hills.



## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE NEW YEAR

At Great Masterhouse the mist clung round the doors and crept like a breathing thing against the windows, as though it would envelope and cut it off from the rest of the living world. Inside the house there was that sense of subdued movement which is caused by the presence of many people all bent upon the same purpose, and the kitchen was half-filled with men and women ranged on benches and chairs round the walls and near the table. The light illumined their faces and threw their shadows in varying degrees of grotesqueness against the whitewash which formed the background.

Beside the hearth, a little apart from the rest, sat Mrs. Walters in the straight chair which she usually occupied, the upright pose of her figure bearing a silent rebuke to some of those who had fallen into glaringly human attitudes. Opposite to her was Nannie Davis. Between them the great fire burned and glowed in the chimney under the high mantel with its rows of brass candlesticks, which stood "with their best side towards London," as the old woman said.

The man in black who had preached in the little chapel when George had been discovered asleep there by Anne was standing by the kitchen table. His hand rested on an open Bible and he was reading from it in a loud monotonous voice. In stature he was small and mean, but he threw out his syllables with the assurance of one accustomed to sway his audience.

To-night he was lodged at Great Masterhouse, for the farm



was his head-quarters whenever his tour of preaching brought him to the Black Mountain district. He had seldom visited the house without holding a service in it at least once during his stay, and now, on the last night of the old year, he had settled with Anne that a meeting should take place near midnight, so that he and his hearers should have the chance of beginning the new one in prayer and supplication. It was a thing which had never been done before, and he hoped that some who might otherwise have failed to be present would be drawn to it by curiosity and the novelty of the experience.

But, in spite of this, the room contained hardly more than thirty people, as the thickness of the fog had made it very difficult for those at a distance to push their way through the heavy darkness. As a result it followed that the whole congregation was made up of really earnest persons, and the preacher found himself so much in accord with it that he was stirred to the depths by the moral support he felt in the very air around. He threw his keen glance over the figures before him, over the rough coats, heavy boots, and the hands clasped together or resting open in the lassitude of physical weariness. To him they were the little remnant saved from the burning, out of the many who dwelt in bondage round them. He was a narrow man, zealous, untiring, faithful in the least as in the greatest, sparing neither himself nor others. He had walked many miles that day and he was to set out before sunrise on the following morning for a far-off place, holding a meeting half-way to his destination and preaching again in the barn which would also be his shelter at night. It was no wonder if his influence was great, for he possessed that which could drive his own soul and body forward through physical as through mental struggle, through hunger and cold, through fatigue and pain. He had the courage of a lion and it shone out of the eyes in his small, fierce face. It was the mighty heart in the little body, the little man and the big odds, the thing which, through all time, will hold and keep and fascinate humanity while there is an ounce of blood or nerve left in it.



The hands of the large, eight-day clock which stood with its back to the wall were on their way from eleven to midnight, holding on their course with a measured tick that had neither haste nor delay. It was the only sound which seemed to have courage to defy the preacher's voice, and it appeared to impress him in some way, for he glanced towards it now and again during his reading and the prayers he offered. Anne sat stiff and still in her place, and Nannie, who was weary with the day's work and the unwonted vigil, began to nod. He prayed on and on.

It was a quarter to twelve when he rose from his knees to begin his sermon, and those whose flesh was weaker than their spirit and whose heads had begun to droop roused themselves as he stood up.

He took his theme from the parable of the rich man who pulled down his barns and built greater, saying to his soul, "Eat, drink, thou hast much goods laid up for many years," and whose soul was required of him that night. As he dwelt on the folly of looking forward, the danger of spiritual delay, and the remorseless flight of the time which should be spent in preparing for eternity, every face was turned towards him, and even Nannie felt her attention compelled by his words and by the force which poured from his vehement spirit. The eagerness of his expression was almost grotesque as he leaned forward calling upon his hearers to forsake their sins and to repent while there was yet time, while the day of Grace yet lasted.

"You are on the verge of another year," he began when he had read out the parable, "and your feet are drawing nigh to the shores of eternity. Are you ready—you, and you, and you—to face that change that waits you? Can you meet the Messenger who may be in the middle of your road as you return to your homes this very night? There can be no looking back, no halting when the summons comes, as come it will, no changing of a past that is the test by which you will stand or fall. Every day that you live is an account



sealed, a leaf turned over for ever, a thing no one can take back. What is your account in the past?"

He stopped and wiped the sweat from his face with his handkerchief. The clock warned, and the hands pointed to a few minutes before the hour. The preacher looked towards it.

"And, as you sit here," he cried, "the Old Year is dragging out its last moments and the New Year is coming up—even now we can hear its footsteps drawing closer and closer——"

He paused, holding up his hand as though to convey to his hearers' minds the picture that he saw in his own. And, in the pause, it began to be actually plain to their bodily senses.

There was a dead silence and they sat holding their breath, rooted in their places, for the sound of an approaching tread was surely coming up the passage.

The tension in the room was almost a tangible thing ; men sat with eyeballs fixed, and women grasped each other. On it came, nearer, nearer, till it stopped at the door. The latch turned, and on the threshold stood Rhys Walters.

He did not come further, he only remained standing where he was, looking at the familiar place and the people gathered in it. His clothes were stained and torn, his hair was wet with mist, and the angles of his thin shoulders were sharp beneath his coat. He looked at Anne, rigid and spellbound upon the hearth, and a strange fear stirred within her. Each in the room stared at him, dumb, and all were conscious of something that had set its seal upon him and divided him from themselves.

Nannie's cry, as she ran to him, broke the bond of silence which held them, and they rose, pressing towards the figure at the door. Before she could reach him through the crowded medley of chairs and human beings he had gone and his steps were echoing again down the flags of the passage.

Anne was behind her as she stood at the outer door straining her eyes into the night and the thickness. The preacher, who had caught up a lantern from a nail in the passage on which it hung, was holding it up, and a bar of light stretched out and



died in the fog ; the men and women came round, whispering and peering.

Mrs. Walters went out into the courtyard calling Rhys' name, and Nannie, down whose cheeks tears were running, began to implore the bystanders to go out and find the man who had been, but a minute before, in their midst. There was no sign nor sound, and through the still air came only the monotone of a distant stream in the mountain, heavy with recent rain.

Anne turned mutely to the preacher ; her lips were closed and she put out her hand towards him ; she looked strange and shaken.

"I will go," he said. "Men, will you come with me?"

About a dozen responded. The people belonging to Great Masterhouse began to hunt in every outhouse and stable for more lanterns, and, when they had found what they wanted, they filed out of the yard with the little man in front of them.

Anne and Nannie stood together watching the lights disperse on the plateau. One was weeping ; the other stood with her stony face to the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dawn was near when Rhys toiled up a steep spur that jutted out from the mass of the mountain. Though morning was at hand the fog reigned below and only the levels above him were emerging from the pall which had covered them for days. The summit of the Twmpa would soon be lifting itself in the chill of daybreak.

All night he had wandered, wandered. Once or twice he had seen the flicker of lights in the hands of the searchers and, with an unexplained instinct, had avoided them. He could not tell where he was going, but he groped along. Twice he had sunk down exhausted and lain in the bitter cold upon the hillside ; once sleep had overtaken him and he had spent a couple of hours on the earth, to awake numb and chilled to the bone. But the force of his consuming spirit had driven him on, and he now stood on a height and saw faintly the heavy



waves of mist that lay below him over the hidden world like the Valley of the Shadow.

His feet were on the utmost edge of a great chasm, but the driving vapour which curled round them up to his knees hid from him the depths that were down, sheer down, within a dozen inches of where he was standing. Had any one been beneath him on the hills, and able to see up through the density and the dark hour, they would have beheld the solitary figure, erect, still, looking out over the space. There was nothing before him but thick, stifling atmosphere. But he was unconscious of that.

For some time he stood, neither moving nor turning, facing eastwards. As daybreak began to grow, he lifted his head, and, throwing out his arms towards the coming light, he took one step forward.

And so, in the dawning, passed the soul of Rhys Walters, beyond the judgment or the mercy of man, into the unfaltering hand of the Eternal Justice. In this sorry world it is one who can get justice for the hundreds who get mercy—the mercy which, we are told, “blesseth him that gives and him that takes.”

But Justice carries no perquisites.



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